

ABSTRACT

Title of Document: PRIVATE LIVES AND GLANCING BLOWS:
A PHILOSOPHY OF DISCONNECTION

Katherine Ann Davis, Master of Fine Arts, 2009

Directed By: Professor Howard Norman, Department of
English

The following stories, letters, and novel excerpt explore the impossibility of reconnecting to the past. They examine moments in their characters' lives when the desire for such a connection is quite strong—it means wanting to have potential, wanting to belong somewhere, and wanting not to be lonely. Questions of truth in memory and perception also emerge.

I explore this desire by situating characters at different points in their lives, so they are looking back across varying distances: for the narrator in “Reasons I Got Up This Morning, going back means a return to the day before, and in “Gustav Has Glancing Blow” it means a return to childhood. The boy in “My Collector” wants entire histories preserved so that they are alive forever and he can be part of them.

PRIVATE LIVES AND GLANCING BLOWS: A PHILOSOPHY OF
DISCONNECTION

By

Katherine Ann Davis

Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Maryland, College Park, in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts
2009

Advisory Committee:
Professor Howard Norman, Chair
Assistant Professor Maud Casey
Assistant Professor Merrill Feitell

© Copyright by
Katherine Ann Davis
2009

Dedication

For Dory, Jason, Lisa, and Sarah—thanks for your banter, humor, and continual encouragement. You've kept me sane.

It's almost over, said the man.

Okay, said the boy. He stopped the cart by the side of the road. He shielded his eyes from the blowing ash in the gray sky. But are we still the good guys? he asked.

Yes, said the man.

And we didnt lose the fire? asked the boy.

No. We still carry the fire.

They carried tarps and old mittens and tattered cloths, said Tim O'Brien. They carried shopping carts, blankets, canned peaches, fortune cookies, endurance, and hope.

Sometimes they carried cupcakes.

And sometimes, said James Baldwin, they stood still and looked outside a window, hearing music in the air and contemplating a larger world beyond their own lives.

Cool, said the boy.

Table of Contents

Dedication	ii
Table of Contents	iii
The Private Life of Mr. Whippy	1
Reasons I Got Up This Morning	27
Gustav Has Glancing Blow	51
A Letter	93
Another Letter	103
My Collector	111

The Private Life of Mr. Whippy

My art teacher looks especially sketchy today. He's sweating, for one, and the hair on the back of his head is sticking straight up like he just rolled off the couch in the faculty lounge. Across the room, a bag of clay slips off his desk and plops onto the floor. He bends to pick it up, his eyes meet mine, and he smooths his hands down the front of his apron. I want to know why he does this. It's directed at me and kind of suggestive, even though right now clay-water is dripping onto my yellow tights and I don't look sexy. I want to write his actions and give him motives; I want to understand him better. But first, the thought hits me: he needs a name. I can't be honest about him if I use his real name.

I've already got ink stains on my hoodie, so I mop up the clay-water with a sleeve and slide my notebook underneath the table, onto my lap. I touch the tip of my pen to the page and wait. I want inspiration, and so I keep watching him. He needs a good name—one with interesting associations.

He takes clunky steps around his desk, past the kind of Styrofoam bust cutouts you see in a wig shop and stacks of wooden boards leaning against the wall. His leg brushes a smock that partially covers the boards; his hair brushes a clump of plastic flowers hanging from the ceiling. He laughs at nothing in particular, and the noise slices through the students' voices and has the effect of an alarm. We get quiet and give him our attention.

No, no, he shakes his head. Get back to work, he points at the tables in front of us. I'll come around to check on you, he draws circles in the air with his fingers splayed. He whistles against the classic rock station on the radio.

"What, is it Christmas?" asks the girl next to me, listening.

I shake my head. I recognize his tune from somewhere else entirely.

Two years ago in the spring, when I was fourteen, my mom took me to England. She rented a car and drove us every day until we got lost; she stopped when she felt comfortable. Once we used Internet directions that said "13 miles down unnamed road." I remember the countryside as layers of hills dotted with houses—I liked it better than London. The city felt well worn, and it guided you to certain places. Outside of it, I felt like there was more to discover. Wind swirling the clouds overhead. Gardens of roses climbing wild over fences. Other flowerbeds, even fields, with colors that looked as though someone had taken handfuls of mixed-up seed and tossed them straight up into the air, letting the plants grow wherever.

I took pictures. My photos, like my memories, are scattered and leafy. One shows my mom at dusk, sitting on a short brick wall and turned partly away. The brick is dingy from moss; the sun-gold field behind it doesn't match the spark in her eyes. Her ginger hair glows brighter than the sky. She's looking beyond a cluster of orange and purple wildflowers and past streams of clouds. I can't imagine her more alive. Everywhere we went she talked about the war with old men and women who ran bakeries and bed and breakfasts. They talked about the Bush administration's success with dehumanization. Their steady grip on unreality. Everyone agreed that anger had spread worldwide—she didn't tell them her cancer was spreading. In the towns, we ate lots of

ice cream. She wanted to give me good memories. Except it wasn't ice cream but ice cold spun sugar, beaten and teased, light as cotton candy, offered and sold to the sounds of "Greensleeves" and a truck's diesel engine.

My eyes are closed, and I am running my tongue along my teeth, listening to my art teacher. He stops whistling. I blink my eyes. He clears his throat and asks if I need help. It's because the rest of the class has started working and I haven't. I push my notebook to rest on my knee, moving my hand as though I need to scratch my leg. The whole time, I'm looking at his face. His eyes are light brown. His lips are moist and pink, and I think I know what he's been doing. I noticed Mrs. McGruntle's disheveled bun earlier today—and her hair is always perfect, as I'd written in an earlier story. Another clue to the truth. I want to say it, but first he needs a name.

Mr. Whippy, like on the ice cream truck in England. I could call him that. He might have some depth to him—desperation and a somber song rumbling beneath sweet-seeming fluff. He looks spun out of air sometimes, the skin on his face is so creamy.

“Do you need some help?” asks Mr. Whippy. It suits him.

No, no, I shake my head. I slap a piece of clay onto the table and begin shaping it into a long snake, slowly rocking my hands over it, rolling it back and forth beneath my fingers and palms. He watches for a few seconds and then leans in and opens his mouth to speak.

Mr. Whippy whispers, “Would you—”

“It's for the design,” I interrupt, as though I have a plan.

He clears his throat again and turns his back to me. He walks to another table. He won't be back anytime soon, but it doesn't matter. He has Mrs. McGruntle to sleep

with, and anyway I won't always need to see him, or even to be around him. I already know him enough to write him.

He stands still, looking down. He taps his fingertips together and pretends to monitor another student's progress. His hands have long, lovely fingers, and I imagine he's really looking at them. They are his sexiest feature: large with calluses on his palms, and his fingernails neatly clipped. The skin's surface is sun-damaged, multicolored spots of gray-brown, and clay dries on it in places and stays wet in others. Where it is wet, it is deep gray and sticky. It clings to his hands like a second skin. Where it is dry, it is white. It cracks with the creases when he moves his fingers, and it stays in specks when he rubs away the larger white fragments. It pales his fingernails and surrounds his knuckles with a crusty film. Hard-working hands, busy hands. I've never seen them clean.

I stop rolling my clay. I fold and pinch the snake in its middle, then I crush its two ends together. I try to twist it like pastry, but it pulls apart from the pressure. I roll it into a ball and flatten it against the table. Then I set it aside—but not too far away—and reach down for my notebook to do some real work. Earlier, Mr. Whippy was yawning as he watched us scurry to begin the assignment he gave: make a container with a lid. He clapped his hands together and rubbed them briskly and hard as though considering the best way to tell us that he has no helpful advice. Sculpture is useless, and nobody would buy our craft projects when assembly lines create things more practical and beige. I'm terrible at sculpture, and I don't care.

But I can shape stories, braid strands of truth, which is important. Such knowledge is important. I can see the sign on Mrs. McGruntle's wall: Knowledge Is

Power. Contrast that with a broken potter's wheel and a kiln that bursts practically anything you put into it. Mr. Whippy once again meets my eyes. I concentrate on pounding air pockets out of what is now my half-inch thick clay oval.

Susie L. approaches him with two chunks of the clay. She'd shaped the top piece into a kind of quarter-moon with one small lump bent out from the side. She holds the quarter-moon out a little. "Can I wrap this in something?" It is a stupid question (defying Mrs. McGruntle's other sign) because we've always stored our clay projects the same way, but he only says yes and gives her a pile of scratchy, brown paper towels and directs her to the bags on the shelf. Their hands touch, and I see him flinch a little like he's been shocked. She takes the towels with her to the sink.

My palm misses the clay and hits the table. Mr. Whippy and I are still watching her. Susie giggles and rolls her eyes at her friends, and she walks with an exaggerated sway in her tight jeans. Our gazes travel to the table in front of her, and we cringe at the bright pink of her book bag and her glittery "Sugar" pins. Her hair is beautiful like my mom's was, with strands ranging from red to ash blond to butter yellow, and when I was young I would stare at both of them, trying to separate the colors like Pick-Up-Stix. Nothing else about Susie interests me; I am interested in Mr. Whippy's interest. I would've assumed his thoughts are pretty much filled with Mrs. McGruntle, but right now he is mesmerized. For one, Susie has expressive eyes. He feels sympathy there—a depth he knows she sets free only when working on projects for his class. We've been surprised by her results more than once.

He bites hard on his bottom lip. Some chapped skin is peeling off, and he runs his tongue over it. He rises, and I move to his desk. I slip sideways behind him; he walks

away from the kiln and over to Dennis H.'s table. The tabletops are high, light glossy wood, and graffitied by student artists so the marks are probably best described as deliberate wear-and-tear. The floor and walls are orange. We sit on metal stools. Dennis H. is the star in my class, meaning he has the most pieces in the display case, and Mr. Whippy talks to him when he wants to give an easy critique. "Nicely done, good use of negative space, I like it," he says, instead of, "Did you think about how best to execute this idea?"

I stand at his desk. Between a bottle of Cornhusker's Lotion and a chipped coffee mug full of ballpoint pens is a piece of paper. I notice his handwriting and lean over it:

Elsie Hand, known for her form-fitting clothes by those who considered her unattainable and for her sweet demeanor by those who'd enjoyed its pleasures, left us far too soon. She fooled us into believing she would become a professional wrestler or work for the Peace Corps, never having told us we'd suffer a loss so tragic.

I look up and see Mr. Whippy laughing beside Dennis, his arms crossed over his skinny chest. His laugh sounds like a siren wail. Dennis smiles and shrugs and pulls at the hemp necklace under his Ozzy Osbourne T-shirt. His face is flushed. "I don't think this is working," he says, "but I still like my idea. I'm not sure what to do."

"Start over, if it's no big loss," says Mr. Whippy with enthusiasm. He reaches around Dennis and crushes the clay shape flat against the table.

Loss? I wonder. I think about how people are flippant about it only when they haven't been affected by it. It's the only guarantee about life, they say. As though that makes everyone an expert. But death can't be a guarantee about life because death is not life. No doubt it's awful, they told me about my mom, but you've got to understand that

everything happens for a reason. And then they told me that time heals. Time heals what? I'd asked. The pain. The sadness. The confusion. Someday, they said, you'll understand why this happens. They said these things to me two years ago today. And all I understand is this: they were full of shit.

But I felt it—in reality, I feel it—and I could tell them how the shock of it makes you insecure and paranoid, afraid and guilty for feeling afraid, and even more guilty when you don't force yourself to think about it and feel afraid; how the pain makes all that's outside of it somehow quieter, like you've suddenly been dropped into a world where nothing is actually happening—not really—like it's a movie of yourself in an empty hospital room that just keeps playing in a dark theater, or how it can overwhelm you to crippling levels so you curl up under your sheets and blankets and don't care if you suffocate as long as you feel protected for a little while. And I couldn't describe it with words like "awful," "tragic," "horrible." Because it's not enough. One word shouldn't be able to explain. One word can't.

Mr. Whippy's voice blares out, "Five more minutes!" He leaves Dennis's table, and I reread the paper on his desk. I don't know why he has started writing because I don't think much of it. Maybe he's trying to impress Mrs. McGruntle. My father says I invent stories as a natural substitute for the impromptu tap dancing and alphabet reciting I did when I was little. (My mom taught me to sing the names of all the presidents, too. She recorded it, and so there is a video of me, somewhere.) My father says I want the attention. "I went through a similar phase in college, for a year," he says. I must be more talented than he is—my phase has lasted longer, for one. I'm also better with language. "Thanx," he writes at the bottoms of Post-It notes, where my mom used to write "Love."

Obviously, I have more talent than Mr. Whippy does. His narrator is more upset about not seeing his predictions come true than about this girl's death. I'd learn more from the characters' body language and a few well-chosen details. I consider writing down comments, but what Mr. Whippy needs is to start over.

I look up, and he isn't watching me. I fold the paper and slip it inside my hoodie. Try harder, I think, you lazy ass. He is over by Susie when the bell rings, his head bent over her shoulder.

That night my father invites three coworkers over for dinner, and Mrs. McGruntle goes to Mr. Whippy's. One of my father's coworkers is "an old family friend" who is forty-eight and has never had a girlfriend for longer than six months. He says he's amazed at how I've grown up, and I press my body against him when we hug. On my back, I feel the heat from his hand through my T-shirt and the ripple of a thrill. I can't explain it any better than to say that sex is always more there than you think, simmering under conversations and polite nods and handshakes. It's just that sometimes I feel like being honest about it.

My father wants to watch football with his friends. I say I am going to my room, and then I walk out the front door to buy a soggy sandwich and Cheetos at the gas station and head to Dennis's house. My father waves without looking. He is mixing drinks in the kitchen. "You're up," he tells one of his friends and sets a glass on the counter, on a spot where one of my mom's photographs used to be. I pull the door closed. I don't imagine him stopping to notice; I don't imagine him moving the glass aside with a twinge of memory. All of our counters and walls are now bare. The house looks like we moved

in a while ago but never planned on staying. Outside, the windows cast a dull yellow light into the darkness. I look in them as I pass by on the sidewalk. The old family friend doesn't see me leave, either. He can miss me on one of his many trips to use the bathroom. He'll unzip on his way down the hall, peek into my bedroom, and find me gone.

There is a Saab parked along the curb in front of Mr. Whippy's house. Next door, I sit on the rug in Dennis's room with my notebook. We're drinking Dr. Pepper and licking our orange fingertips, and he's playing a video game. I pick up my pen and wonder what Mrs. McGruntle says to her husband on these nights, but I don't wonder why it works. Mr. Whippy and Mrs. McGruntle are discreet. For one, they never speak to each another at school. She supervises the cafeteria two days a week during my lunch period, while Mr. Whippy stays in his room with a few honor roll students who want to use the school's art supplies. That's their best opportunity to meet up during the day, and they never do. I don't think they even accidentally run into each other. They probably coordinate their schedules to clash on purpose, so no one suspects. When I do see them in the same room, I catch them deliberately not looking at one another. They keep their eyes on the floor and glance in opposite directions. They talk to other people. And then I can feel Mr. Whippy taking quicker steps; I can hear Mrs. McGruntle's high heels clack more loudly against the floor.

That night she is distracted. It's the kids, she explains, the usual. Mr. Whippy doesn't believe her, but he says nothing and closes his eyes, trying to enjoy the smell of her. She wears a light citrus perfume, different from his wife's spicier scent. It lingers in the faculty lounge and in the hallways at school. She rolls over to face him and strokes

his chest with icy white fingers. They are stubby, ugly fingers with beautiful rings. Fingers, he thinks, with something to hide. A short laugh escapes her mouth. She says that surely he knows how it is. Does she need to explain? She's an English teacher, waging a lonely war on what she calls "grammatical apathy." She forces punctuation, tense, and modifiers into the brains of her freshmen, and *Julius Caesar* into the brains of her seniors. She routinely scans the local newspaper, correcting errors with a red felt-tipped pen. At least once a week, she sends it back with her corrections.

Dennis reads my notebook over my shoulder. "How do you know all this about Mrs. McGruntle?" he asks.

I tell him it's because I've written her. "She also teaches swimming lessons at the Y during the summer, shaves her legs every morning in the bathroom sink, and has two glasses of wine at night with dinner because she read somewhere that it's healthy," I say. (*Like my mom, I don't say.*)

He sets my notebook and glass of soda aside and pulls my hoodie off my shoulders. While he's kissing me, I feel his hands rolling my tank top up my stomach. He drops his head and sucks my nipples like an infant.

"Do you like that?" he asks.

"I'm over it." I want to push him away, but instead I touch my notebook with a finger.

He yanks my tank top back down. "You should write about yourself and why you're so fucked-up," he says.

"I'm over that, too."

That night Mr. Whippy senses disappointment. It isn't the sex, though I can't explain how they are together. I'm not a virgin. I just haven't had good experiences. I asked Dennis once to go slower, and even then I wasn't sure what I should be feeling. For a second I had an idea, but he was already finished. I doubt any sixteen-year-old girl is having good sex, even if she's memorized entire issues of *Cosmopolitan*.

Mrs. McGruntle gazes at Mr. Whippy like she's looking at something far away. He recognizes her disappointment because he has it, too. She says she hasn't been writing like she used to. He says he understands. He does. He hates his own life because he's not an artist—not really—and he's stuck doling out bland assignments to a roomful of brats who could probably learn more practicing on their own. He knows Mrs. McGruntle's obsession with grammar was created as a way to make her job more interesting and that her attraction to him had a similar beginning. He guesses at the rest, and so do I. With the look she's giving him, we imagine her scrawling over his body with a felt-tipped pen, leaving red marks everywhere, and then sending him away.

The next day, I spend art class working in my notebook and decide in the last five minutes that my clay project will be a broken mess to symbolize the effect of death on the living. If Mr. Whippy says it's not a container, then I'll plop two of the pieces together. If he says it's too easy, then I'll explain the concept and my expertise and make him feel like an asshole. I steal another sheet of paper off his desk seconds before the bell rings—I don't have time to read it first. But I think he may have seen me. His quick glance from across the room is blocked by the other students rising to leave.

After we are dismissed, the rest of Mr. Whippy's afternoon passes like the clay stuck under his fingernails. He's a supervisor for my study hall; he comes out of his room only to ask what that noise is. He crams his fingers into his jeans pockets, stares at the floor, and never repeats the question when we don't respond. He shuffles his feet when he walks back to the art room and forgets to leave the door open. It's suggestive, but I know Mrs. McGruntle is teaching an English class at the same time, and he'd have no way to sneak her in.

Dennis has another class with him after lunch while I'm in Biology. The students in this class chose the idea of artistic expression over constructing identical shelves with oval mirrors in shop class. The boys draw pictures of rock stars and dream of fame; the girls paint giant red flowers and dream of beauty. They hope their subjects will somehow come to life and influence them—or at least speak for them. Mr. Whippy smiles faintly and gives them advice on how best to wash their brushes.

Because Dennis lives next door to Mr. Whippy, he gets paid to mow the Whippys' lawn. He does this after school. Mr. Whippy's wife Fran gave him a key to the garage, but he's never been inside the house. Fran likes Dennis and always asks her husband about Dennis's artwork. She works for a company that manufactures boat motors, and her job is to collect data on motors that aren't working. Then she analyzes their failures. She finds her job dull to talk about, and so she always asks about Dennis.

I walk home from school because I don't live far. There is a tiny restaurant a block away that bakes fresh twisted bread in the morning. Weekdays on the way to school my mom and I would stop and buy a loaf, and we'd sit outside and break off pieces—some for us, some for birds and squirrels. The owners liked her and would give

me sugar to sprinkle on mine. Two years ago, they came to her funeral and gave me long hugs.

I sit on the wooden bench outside and pull my notebook out of my bag. As I said before, it doesn't matter if Mr. Whippy isn't around me: I can still write him. He comes home and drops his coat onto a kitchen chair. He goes straight into the bathroom.

Dennis pushes the lawnmower past the window, but Mr. Whippy doesn't see him. There is a tall mirror that spans the length of the countertop, but he doesn't see that, either. If he did, he might wonder about the thinness of his chest and how his heart and ribs can fit inside. He might wonder if it's just a hollow space in reality. Instead he ignores the mirror, opens a drawer, and uses his wife's tweezers to scrape under his fingernails. The ends of the tweezers are thick so it is a little painful, but he likes to think all the dirt gets cleaned out, even if this is impossible. His hands are his sexiest feature, and he needs to take care of them. He clips off the skin he's peeled back from the base of his nails and cuts some too close so it bleeds. He doesn't feel any pain; the skin around his nail beds is callused. He grabs some toilet paper, bunches it up, and presses his bleeding fingers against it.

Outside the restaurant I take a fingernail clippers out of my bag and do the same to my skin, except that I also cut my nails short to avoid for a while the nervous habit we share of picking at our cuticles. (As with my writing skills, Mr. Whippy doesn't have my foresight.) Pieces of my skin fall through gaps between the wooden boards I'm sitting on. I use rolled up facial tissues to stop the bleeding. But unlike Mr. Whippy, I feel the pain: my fingers throb, and I lean forward to push them against the bench. They hurt

worse for a few moments, but then the original pain disappears. I return to my notebook and suck the tip of my pen.

Fran is home by the time he finishes in the bathroom. Her purse hangs over his coat on the chair. He automatically moves to the table, lifts the purse, and slides on the coat. He picks up a piece of paper—a version of what I had taken from his desk earlier in the day, reworked from memory:

She was sixteen, and everyone said how sad it was that such a loving and lively person who had impacted the lives of everyone she ever met should be stolen from us so young. But the real tragedy is that, at sixteen, she never had the opportunity to grow into herself. She never really knew herself, and so we never really knew her. She was pliable as clay, and as soft—a product of influential, intellectual sculptors that surrounded her.

He needs to see Mrs. McGruntle. “I’m going to be late tonight,” he says to his wife before “hello.”

She says that’s fine. She steps toward him, and Mr. Whippy finds her touch a little too soft, her smile a little too wide. He suddenly remembers that she came home much later than he did last night. He notices that she doesn’t try to look at his paper.

She says one of her friends wants to get together for dinner. “Is that all right?” She stands in front of him and rests her arms on his shoulders. She tips her head to one side. She doesn’t ask about Dennis’s work or how his day was or where he’s going.

He picks up his keys noisily in case she missed the subtle details of his coat and shoes, his slippers discarded next to the door. “I’m going to the library.”

“You don’t read.” She’s a little too amused.

He says he wants to copy some landscapes.

“Mmm.” She reaches up to adjust an earring. The bones in the back of her hand rise and fall like the sun’s reflection off ripples of sand at a beach shore. Her tanned skin makes him think of the trips to the Mediterranean they never took, the portraits he never painted, the envy he never felt from other men—their eyes devouring her in a soft white dress while he alone enjoyed her touch.

She strokes Mr. Whippy's face and says, “Stubble.” Her tongue feels soft in his mouth. She laughs. Her voice is low and moves like molasses.

“Which friend?” His eyelids flicker. He hears Dennis stop the lawnmower’s engine and roll it into the garage.

“Donna.” She walks away, leaving the spicy scent of ginger in the air. Does he remember a Donna? He isn’t sure. He sits down and rewrites the rest of what I had stolen:

The very fact of her departure at such a young age gives her peers a sense of their own mortality. This is more of a legacy than most can hope for.

He hears the car door and watches Fran from the kitchen window. Possibilities not put to rest by her wide, white smile tease his brain. She puts a hand up to wave, the other grasps the steering wheel, and she turns her head to the side to look behind her. She backs out of the driveway. She doesn't press the horn. Mr. Whippy leaves the window, and neither of us pictures her looking back.

Later he tells Mrs. McGruntle, “I think Fran knows but she doesn't care.”

“It's your imagination,” she says.

“That doesn't make it less true.”

Inside the plastic bag, the clay slurps against my skin and bleeds between my fingers. I need a fresh piece for the potential base of my container, but it needs to turn out suitably damaged.

(Because death damages everything around it, I plan to say. The art happened when it blew up in the kiln.)

It is the next day, and Mr. Whippy tells us we should be finishing up the clay unit. Dennis wants help. He wears a black Metallica T-shirt, his hemp necklace, and his stringy brown hair in a new bowl cut. His jeans hang low on his waist and look as though they'll slide off at any moment, despite his belt. He pounds a piece of clay into a pancake and calls Mr. Whippy to his table. Mr. Whippy is distracted. He says, "Any air bubbles will destroy it in the kiln." Dennis exaggeratedly sighs.

Mr. Whippy fired half of the students' projects this morning. Some of the pieces turned out well—imperfect, bright white versions of the images in the students' minds. Some broke into many pieces—shattered, jagged, and all the more abstract. I think the broken images are more fascinating. They've excelled past the shapes they were meant to represent. But Mr. Whippy doesn't see them this way. To the owners of the shards, he gives a new lump of clay and a few sympathetic words. "It happens. Try to get the bubbles out and don't make it too thin." He wipes his hands on his apron. I cringe as he dumps the shards into the trash bin by the sink.

Dennis bends his pancake into a loose bowl. He pinches the edges like a piecrust. I get the feeling he is deliberately failing this one, protesting the lack of attention he's received. The students with solid replicas of recognizable objects begin sanding rough edges and the hard little bits of clay that remain after their attempts to create texture. The

ones with pieces almost ready for the kiln are pressing some last-minute stitches across their seams with long nails and smoothing them over with water-dipped fingertips—sewing without a needle and thread. The ones with new clay are glaring with impatience at the others. Dennis is one of these. He has just finished his bowl and is placing the flattened ends of a rolled, horseshoe-shaped piece into a dish filled with water. He tips over the dish. "Jesus!" he says. His T-shirt is wet. Susie is part of the group that will have their pieces fired later today. She is concentrating and doesn't move her hair away from her face. She hardly speaks to her friends.

I roll a tiny strip of excess clay into a ball and dab it on the table. I rub it between my thumb and forefinger and toss it into the trash bin. I slide my notebook onto my lap and retrieve my pen from inside my boot. Mr. Whippy walks to the sink and begins rinsing his hands, but he knows he cannot clean them off completely. He takes several stiff, brown paper towels from the silver dispenser and gives all but one to Dennis. The last he bends into a triangle and scrapes the folded point along his cuticles.

Mrs. McGruntle is in his thoughts again. During the mid-morning break, optimistically titled the Student Activity Period, I was in a Spanish Club meeting, surrounded by the yearly winter party discussion, and writing about a rare meeting between Mr. Whippy and Mrs. McGruntle at school. Clay bits were stuck in his hair, and he had just eaten a bag of potato chips. Greasy salt from his fingers left stains on his apron. Mrs. McGruntle was wearing a light blue dress. Her breath was mint cool. She said it's fine and that she has a lot to do tonight, after Mr. Whippy told her he couldn't see her. She spoke with a brisk tone usually reserved for lazy seniors who ask for more extra

credit so they can pass her class and graduate on time. When she smiled, Mr. Whippy and I saw no reservation or regret. We heard nothing like disappointment in her voice.

He will come home the following day and not be able to ignore the empty house or the bathroom mirror. He will look at his face before turning on the water in the sink. He will imagine Mrs. McGruntle looking at him, tracing his weak jaw with her crystal eyes. For her the width of his forehead once spoke of his adventurous spirit; for Fran's silky eyes the gradual decline into the hollows of his cheeks perfectly complemented the softness of her body where he'd rested his head from time to time. He will scrub his lovely fingers with Fran's loofah sponge and strip ribbons of skin from them. Blood will mix with water in the sink. The water will be hot, punching the tenderness of raw skin. Fran will come home two hours later than he expects her. She'll say, "I have to finish a presentation for tomorrow morning." She'll turn to leave.

Hours later he'll swallow, his mouth dry, his tongue sticky as he anticipates the taste of her. He'll watch a small, graceful hand sweep multicolored strands of red and blond hair over one shoulder, and he'll wonder if her face looks rosier than it did a minute ago. He'll hope so. He'll notice the orange strap of her bra as the weight of her book bag pulls on her glittery T-shirt. She will step forward and drop her bag and blink and part her lips and tell him she is sorry she's so nervous. "It'll be over soon," he'll say. She'll press her fingertips to his shoulder and skim them across his chest. His chest will look broad to her. He'll feel the warmth of her skin and the ripple of a thrill at her touch.

I've been excused to go to the bathroom, and now I'm walking back to the art room. The hallways are quiet, brown-tiled with mustard walls, but I can hear the sounds of Philip Zimbardo coming from one of the classes. We all have to watch his videos in psychology, even though he seems like an ass. I open the door to the art room. The musty smells of dried watercolor paint and clay greet me, and a few of the students look up. I walk quickly past them. Mr. Whippy is talking to Susie, and she blushes behind her curtain of hair. She murmurs, "Okay, I can come in later."

Mr. Whippy stays late sometimes and keeps the room open for a small group of students who want to work on extra projects, but he hasn't done this in a while. The students are typically enthusiastic, if not talented. They toss paint on canvas boards and dabble in watercolors and pastels. They discuss the comic strips they write, starring the teachers in the high school, and weave yarn and bend wire sculptures as they brainstorm new categories for Forensics. Their newest obsession is Impromptu Playacting. Mr. Whippy says nothing to them about their ideas, but he admires the freedom of their imaginations. He doesn't give them any advice. Instead, he sits and rubs Cornhuskers Lotion onto his hands. He writes on his sheets of paper. He makes lists of his uncompleted projects. These always end up in the garbage. No one asks him about the dusty pile of canvases and sketchpads behind his desk. This is the pile that is covered partially with a smock—the pile he never trips over because he is accustomed to its presence.

He moves away from Susie and doesn't approach her again for the rest of the period. Dennis has completed what looks like a basket. "He didn't say the lid had to cover the whole thing," he says. He shrugs but pauses at the shelf when he sees his

destroyed piece. It was meant to be a melted clock draped over a chair, inspired by Dalí. Susie brings two pieces to the shelf, wrapped in wet paper towels. She doesn't look anyone in the eye and hurries out of the room when the bell rings. Her "Sugar" pins clang against each other on her book bag. Mr. Whippy twists his fingers.

As always my father goes to a bar after work. He works, goes to the bar, and buys me the black eyeliner, black hair color, and silver lipstick that make me look less like my mom. As always I go to school, and then I don't want to go home to the emptiness. I buy taco dip from the deli at Piggly Wiggly and take a plastic spoon from the samples counter. I sit in the grass outside the tennis courts in front of the school. It's getting late in the season, and most of the leaves have turned. A light breeze carries the sun's warmth over me, and I listen to the dull thump of tennis balls against the hard courts and the squeaks of skidding shoes. The sun feels good, and I watch the motions of the game. The light footsteps and graceful swipes with the wrists. Life is that silence, suspended in the air before racket meets ball.

A few students leave the school and drive off in their cars, and then Mrs. McGruntle walks out the front doors. She is a contrast of high heels and sweat pants. She walks by a little before noticing me, and then she feels obligated to talk. "Did you finish the reading for tomorrow?"

"Not yet." I look at her shoes.

She smiles. "These were not my first choice for the afternoon. They might make it difficult to go jogging."

I smile too because she's really not a bad person, and I know she's been through a lot with Mr. Whippy. "Did you check out the paper today?"

"It's sitting on my doorstep at home. With my tennis shoes." She asks if I'm getting a ride, and I tell her I'm waiting for Mr. Whippy to open up the art room again.

At his name, she nods. "I thought I'd drop you off if it was on my way." She wishes me a good night and starts to walk away but stops. She hesitates. She turns back to me and hesitates again. She is thinking about stalling to see Mr. Whippy; she is thinking of a plan that might work. I look up at her, and her smile is smaller and a little shaky this time.

"I know this must be a difficult time of year for you," she says. "You'll let me know if there's anything I can do."

She must have decided against her plan. "Thanks," I say. "But I'm okay." I swallow a spoonful of the taco dip, and she gives me a little nod. She must decide to catch Mr. Whippy tomorrow because I don't notice her look back at the school as she crosses the parking lot. She stops at her car, a Saab. Never mind; it's a Toyota.

Mr. Whippy said he wanted half an hour to organize a few things and he'd be back after that. I hug my knees to my chest. The breeze is gone, and I can feel the late sun soaking into my T-shirt. The two students on the tennis court are arguing about whether a ball hit the baseline. They have forgotten that they aren't keeping score anyway.

Susie walks out of the school, holding a notebook against her chest. She looks around and hurries over to where I'm sitting. She stands in front of me. I can't see her face because the sun behind her hurts my eyes.

She asks me to do her a favor, and I can hear a tremble in her voice. "What is it?" I ask.

"Can you move my pieces to the other shelf? He can just fire them—they're pretty much done anyway." I squint up at her. Her back is hunched. She shifts her weight to her other foot and winces.

I say yes.

She says, "I have to go home." She talks fast.

I ask which piece is hers.

"Next to Dennis's basket-thingy. They're wrapped in paper towels."

I nod, and she waits. I tell her it's fine; we're all almost done with the clay.

"Thanks."

"It'll be over soon," I say.

"I don't think so," says Susie, and she cuts across the lawn that surrounds the tennis courts. One of the players calls to her, but she doesn't look up. She is running, and I can hear the pins on her book bag clang together.

The sun is getting low, and the air still and silent. Darkness drains the colors out of things. I get up and walk back to the school. Mr. Whippy is already in the art room. Dennis rushes ahead of me and smashes his basket. "This is bullshit," he says. He pounds it into a flat disk. The radio is playing, but Mr. Whippy doesn't whistle with it or against it. There are four other people in the room, sitting on the high stools. Three of them are from our class and working with the clay. The other is painting his self-portrait like John Lennon's—in fast multi-colored strokes.

I set my things on an empty table and glance at the notebook in my bag. But I don't take it out. Instead, I notice a pile of soiled paintbrushes in the sink that must have been left over from earlier in the day. The inky purple pigment seeps under my fingernails as I squeeze and rinse them out. It seems like I could rinse them forever. The thought hits me: how can so much paint get trapped inside a single brush?

Mr. Whippy tells Dennis and the others he wants our completed projects no later than tomorrow so that we'll have time to glaze them before the weekend. He makes a fist with his left hand and taps it lightly against his right palm. Perhaps this signifies time passing. Two of his fingers have tissues wrapped around them, Scotch tape wrapped around the tissues. Perhaps he's scrubbed with his wife's loofah sponge sooner than I thought.

I shake the water out of the paintbrushes and walk over to the stacked shelves. Susie's pieces are short, rounded shapes draped in scratchy damp brown. I take them to a table and peel the paper from the sculpted clay. The paper is sticky. I crumple it into a ball and throw it into the trash bin. Then I inspect the clay carefully. I look for cracks in the surfaces and for thin spots—any signs of vulnerability. I smooth the edges with my fingertips. They are well made; they will survive the kiln. Mr. Whippy is watching me from behind his desk. The skin on his face is red and damp, and his hair is plastered with sweat, stuck to the back of his neck. I hold the pieces up and turn one upside down gently to see how they fit together. They are a pair of hands. The bottom hand is cupped and the other rests flat on top of it. Mr. Whippy and I imagine them after they're fired. They'll be strong and stable, smooth and creamy white. Clean, we both think.

Dennis swears loudly, and Mr. Whippy hurries over to his table. He instructs Dennis to keep the chair and melting clock separate while wet.

“But I want to make sure—”

"Trust that they'll fit together somehow."

I wrap Susie's hands in fresh paper towels and place them on the shelf reserved for completed sculptures. I agree that they are done. She doesn't need them to break free into abstract shapes. I touch the hands again and feel like I can understand her through them. I feel like I can glimpse a kind of humanity. They're practically alive.

Back at my table I see my own project in my bag. I open the notebook. My face reddens when I read my words—my thoughtless speculations. In my hands, the paper I've scrawled across feels flimsy and cheap. It's level with the kinds of notes boys had passed me in middle school: *do u like me? Y or N.*

Mr. Whippy's hollow laugh rings in my ears. I look up. We're all staring at him. He's standing next to the boy who's painting the self-portraits. No, no, he shakes his head. “You're just copying. Can't you come up with your own idea?” He turns away from the kid. Get back to work, he spreads his fingers at the rest of us. I close the notebook. I realize my words have no purpose—they're without compassion. There's no real meaning to them, no human feeling. Only emptiness. I carry the notebook to the trash next to Mr. Whippy's desk. It slides into the bin with a soft rustle.

Mr. Whippy lets us use his Cornhuskers Lotion, and so I do. I spread it over my hands, rub it between my fingers, massage my nail beds. It stings between the cracks of my broken skin. A spot drips onto a white sheet of paper next to the bottle. Once again, I recognize his handwriting and lean over it:

Legacy is chased by the hopeless old and gifted to the young. I only wanted to taste it for a while, to experience and be close to it. Elsie understood this, the angel. As long as I was alive inside of her, I was alive. She indulged my selfishness—

Mr. Whippy slaps the paper with his hand. "Can I help you?"

I look into his eyes for a time and my eyes feel dry, but he hardly blinks. I don't feel guilty, but I think maybe I ought to, and so I don't know how to respond. I think of the word "quizzical" and try to put that into my expression as I gaze up into his face.

He stares back at me. "Let's talk about your project."

At first I don't realize he is talking; his mouth hardly opens. I say nothing, and we glance down at his hand covering the paper. Tissue fuzz is stuck around two of his fingernails. He slides the paper closer to his side of the desk. A corner caught under the chipped mug tears off. His hand is sweating, and the paper sticks to it.

"My project," I say. "It's experimental."

"When are you going to finish?" He begins closing his hand into a fist, and I hear the paper fold and crumple. "You haven't put any effort into it. Next week we'll all be ready to move on, and you'll be stuck here."

"Effort?" I repeat.

He doesn't miss my sarcastic tone. "I'm not fooled by you," he whispers.

I stare into his eyes.

"Just so you know, your problems aren't any worse than anybody else's. You think you deserve extra-special treatment, and some of my colleagues think so too, but you're not going to get it here."

We are still locked in each other's gaze, and I feel anger burn inside my chest and surge into my limbs. The goddamn phony. I hate him right now, and it bothers me that I care that much. I think of his to-do lists in the trash underneath my notebook. I think of the pile of dusty canvases and half-empty sketchpads behind his desk, barely hidden from view behind a scrap of cloth. I think of Susie at her home, locked in the bathroom and refusing dinner, gulping water out of Dixie cups to swallow handfuls of Tylenol.

I pull the two folded pieces of paper from my hoodie and toss them onto the desk. My hands are shaking, and I hear my voice tremble. "You'll move on," I say. "I'm sure you'll move on just fine."

He looks down at the paper and stutters when he exhales. "This is mine." He speaks at a higher volume and tries to look at me with an air of accusation.

I nod. I am silent.

"It's experimental," he says. "It means nothing."

"It means nothing," I repeat, and he is less comfortable after I speak. He peels the paper off his damp palm and holds it in front of him. His voice shakes.

"I was just thinking about what we leave behind—what we have to show for, in the end." He snatches up and crushes the papers while gesturing to the dusty pile behind his desk. His eyes don't leave mine as he crumples the papers into a tight ball and stuffs them into a pocket under his apron. But his expression is not malicious this time. It seems to be asking me a question. Dennis and the other students are talking loudly, but there is a gap between commercials on the radio station, and so he lowers his voice.

"You understand, I haven't actually done anything."

I nod. We know.

Reasons I Got Up This Morning

I'm sure someone has written about this before.

I'm in my bed, fighting against alertness. I can hear geese on the lake: their honks are vibrations that bounce off the water and encircle their bodies, and then float in waves through my apartment's crap windows. Science can explain why I hear them. It's all very simple. But I see them because my eyes are closed. (This wouldn't be possible otherwise.) I imagine the water is not smooth. It's windy and overcast today, and that's why they're noisy. They're dipping their beaks low, splitting the rough surface, feeding underwater, stiffening their tails to keep from flipping over. Thick feathers insulate them from the cold.

No. Actually, they're making plans to leave. Geese get loud before takeoff, and that's why they're noisy. The lake is far off, so I guess the city is not busy right now. Traffic is stilled and the neighbor kids are in school. Streets are already paved, lawns mown, and everyone's happy with their houses and driveways for now. I hear no machines breaking apart asphalt or concrete, no echoing beeps that signify large trucks backing into position. There are no construction projects to speak of. This is also why I can hear the geese. I wonder if they feel crowded, pinned in by too many bodies. Next to me, John pulls on the sheets, and I feel a tug across my shoulder. I keep my eyes closed. He exhales.

So if I were to get up now, he might expect pancakes. The frozen variety—I don't think I could handle a mix right now. I also have some frozen turkey sausage links,

but I don't want them to splatter grease on my stovetop, and I can never get rid of the smell of hot oil in under a week. Plus, sausage is too noisy. All that sputtering and popping as they thaw and cook at the same time. (Science again: the water causes it—rebellious against the oil.) Then hissing as cold water hits the smoking brown bits when I rinse the pan. The inevitable noise would be a problem because I'd be standing there in my Milwaukee Brewers T-shirt (given the splattering and the resulting redistribution of grease, naked food preparation could be painful), fixing breakfast, and John would wake up and require conversation.

It wouldn't be just any conversation. He'd require the Real conversation. The now-where-are-we? conversation that, when handled properly, could bring all my deepest fears and concerns into the bare light of day for surgical examination. Conventional wisdom and *Lifetime* movies dictate that this conversation must take place the morning after, at all costs. I can feel my heart pounding in my throat, and I squeeze my eyes shut at the idea of it. My head pushes further into the pillow. No doubt this is an overused conversation, one I can easily imagine without the aid of actual participation. I could use it as a pattern to follow so I don't reveal too much. It ought to be easy enough—it's probably straight out of a movie titled *The Morning After* playing next Wednesday night at 6:30:

“Good morning! Don't worry: despite our having had sexual intercourse, I still respect the way you think, and I care about your life goals.”

“Good morning! I thank you, John, for the reassurance.” (Facing each other, taking each other's hands.) “And even though I was feeling slightly hesitant last night, I do not feel as though you have taken advantage of me. Nor did I fake my orgasm.”

“Splendid. I am thankful we can communicate so openly. It must be our years of solid friendship that allow it. While things do seem awkward now that we have had sex, I hope we can reach a mutual and rational understanding of our feelings.”

“Yes, John. I believe we both want to move forward in a positive direction, and I hope we can agree on what we ought to do next.”

“Let’s start by exploring our individual feelings. I myself am quite confused and overwhelmed. I feel our lovemaking was an expression of my long-held affection for you, and yet I am afraid our consequent relationship will either fade away or move ahead too quickly.”

“As am I, John. I am nervous that our solid and meaningful friendship is at stake. Yet I do not want to hurt your feelings, as they may be stronger than mine.”

“I feel the same way.” (Pause for a brief hug; both parties lean forward at the waist and pat each other on the back.) “And if your feelings are weaker than mine, then I am afraid of getting hurt. I am not certain yet as to the nature of my affection.”

“Me neither, John. I feel pressure to make a quick commitment because we have known each other for a long time and must skip the dating stage. But I couldn’t bear it if our friendship were to get ruined because of foolish and rash decisions.”

“And yet” (pulls her close) “this may be the most important moment of our lives. We must admit that we can no longer be together how we were. We’re connected, and you’re a brand-new part of me.”

Fade to black. Cue a catchy jingle.

A few deep and quiet breaths calm the blood pounding in my throat. I hear one goose honk frantically and then faint splashes as a group of them skims the water’s

surface with feet and wingtips while becoming airborne. The remaining geese settle on intermittent honks and temporary contentment.

I can't talk with John right now. Or in twenty minutes. Possibly not even in twenty hours. It'll be him and me in this quiet apartment, facing factual feelings without the distracting sounds of progress drifting in through these thin walls. Results: disaster amid the scent of hot sausage and maple syrup and light smoke in my kitchen.

Conversation leading up to said results:

“Do you need some help?” (The polite bastard.)

“No, thanks. I've got it.”

“Smells good.”

Then things would take a sinister turn:

“It's crazy how things work out sometimes, isn't it?” (Testing the waters with a generic question he's heard in many forms of popular culture. Also, possible substitution of “amazing” for “crazy.”)

Yes, John, “crazy” is the word...(Let's hope for “crazy”: I'm neither sold on nor prepared for “amazing.”)

“But I'm happy we ended up like this.” (Possibly misinterpreting my confused and anxiety-ridden facial expression.)

Um, “ended up”...? (Weird smile involving a lack of ability to force my lips apart.)

“What are you thinking right now?” (Shit.)

And then I'd have no choice but to parrot his words: “Crazy how things end up.” Because I can't lie when I don't know what is true. And then I'd get all sweaty and

shivery and burn the sausage, and the pan would slip and flip the grease into the toaster, which is pushed on because I forgot that you microwave pancakes, and the grease would incite the toaster to shoot sparks, and not only would my appliance be ruined but the wall behind it would catch fire, and we'd put out our side with damp cloths and metal lids and an extinguisher, but my next door neighbors' apartment would engulf in flames because of that Styrofoam insulation they put against all their outside walls when the air gets cooler at night, and their son would die from toxic fumes because he was making some serious progress on his Nintendo Wii and couldn't leave because video games are addictive (because Theodor Adorno would say their appeal to multiple senses makes them so), and I'd be devastated and in need of grief counseling and probably homeless.

Clearly, John needs to remain unconscious.

Outside, the wind has picked up. I can hear it rattling the window. I stretch my toes, and my foot seems too close to touching his body—much too close to the warmth of his leg. In half-inch spurts I slide it back. I am afraid of rattling the bed, of making too many movements. I wrinkle my nose to stifle a sneeze because the room suddenly smells dusty. I think of an infomercial I saw on television a few days ago. There were cartoon drawings of multicolored particles getting sucked into an air purifier's filter—green representing pet dander, orange representing stale odors, blue representing allergens, etc. Without their say and without exception, this machine was their destination. The cartoon was supposed to prove the effectiveness of the purifier. In truth, it proves nothing. Yet people will buy it. They'll line up at the As Seen On TV tent at the state fair and clutch their giant pickles and meat-on-a-stick and say things like, "It's just that easy" and "Set it and forget it." Parroting Ron Popeil and other chipper persons. Chipper would-bes

running around like the disciples of consumerism. (“But, wait—there’s more!”) I don’t envy Popeil those disciples. Though, it must be nice to be quotable.

Fame, however, is bullshit. You can be famous because of who your parents are. My mother sells homeopathic tinctures, and my father works at the water treatment plant. They’ve neglected self-improvement because they’re too busy making life okay for everyone else. And I offer myself as (further and unnecessary) evidence that you *can* graduate from college with a degree in philosophy and get absolutely nowhere in life.

So I have few prospects.

My only truth is something I can’t put into a sentence. I was happier when things were possible, pre we-gotta-talk-is-this-serious-or-what. No one is going to quote that. It’s hardly wisdom, and certainly not universal. Lots of people would happily be in this situation—in bed after a pleasurable turn with a good friend and thinking this is the stuff that makes solid relationships. To them, I’ve fallen into the right formula.

Conventional wisdom: (Friends)Lovers = Stable Relationship

Order of operations. “Please Excuse My Dear Aunt Sally.” Parenthesis first. But then something gets lost in the process of multiplying.

Now I wonder, is it worse to be the one who remembers or the one who doesn’t? I really don’t know how we got here.

John is still sleeping. I’m glad he doesn’t snore loudly—I was concerned about that. He’s a messy eater. Lots of smacks and loud swallows. He gulps hot coffee and cold water. His crumpled napkins are scattered across my apartment. A stack of paper plates sits on my stove. I worried about them catching fire. Crumbs from pizza crusts

stick to the bottoms of my feet and between my toes. The VCR is still on. These are details I remembered before I fell asleep.

My eyelids flicker but I force them closed, because it symbolizes forcing myself to think this through. John smelled like cinnamon gum and shaving cream last night, and I'd touched his thigh when we talked about real and imagined possibilities.

"How does that go again," he'd asked, "that part about daydreams and fantasies?"

"Possibility draws the line between daydreaming and fantasizing," I'd said.

"So I fantasize about being a robot because it is physically impossible, but I daydream about being serviced by a group of supermodels because it's not impossible," he replied. He kept his voice steady, but I could feel his grin even without looking at him.

"Improbable," I said, refusing to meet his eyes. "But, yes, not impossible."

And now here's what will happen if we're (suddenly) "together": instead of laughing at my jokes he'll interpret them as criticism and think I'm ignoring his needs, and I'll have to wonder if it means something when he forgets our 2 2/3 month anniversary. We'll (suddenly) have to care about things we never thought about before. I want the impossible, the fantasy. I want to go back to the potential moments.

But I know we can't go back. The idea is completely irrational. John is here now, and there is nothing to be done about it. Or maybe I just don't know what to do about it.

It occurs to me that if I were to toss back the sheets, roll off the mattress and consequently wake him, he may not even want breakfast. He might just stretch his arms over his head, yawn, give me a fuck-yeah-I'm-satisfied grin, turn over, and fall back

asleep. Or, he has a fantasy of us waking up together and philosophizing, blinds turned against the world we're picking apart. And because he's a nerd who can speak intelligently about Schopenhauer's will and Kant's categorical imperative, because we're already naked, because it's convenient, and because yesterday saw the sustained sexual tension of formerly Platonic very-good friends shattered, he would probably assume that bringing up universal desire would lead to my rolling on top of him again and directing his hand downward. It would. Another violation of that space between could it happen? and it's happening. That space is luxury.

But here, in reality, I'm alone considering the universal realm. Are we sliding into coupledness? Do we have to be like all those couples I see, usually around shopping malls: the guy talking quietly to his girlfriend, slowly rubbing her back as though consoling her about her grandmother's hip replacement surgery or a poorly-executed manicure? We make fun of them—they seem so desperate for attention. We give them dialogue:

It's okay, Hilda. There will be other sales.

But it was a going-out-of-b-b-business special on sl-sl-slingback pumps.

(Hiccup.) I'll never find them again.

You must be strong, Hilda. Here. Blow your nose with my embroidered handkerchief.

(Wail.) Never again, Blair.

And at the end of it John would turn to me and smile and say, "It's good to know we're better than they are." And I would say, "I always appreciate the validation."

My ear is sore from the pillowcase bunched underneath it and I want to roll over, but I don't want to wake him. I make a fist and shove it under my pillow, beneath my chin. Maybe John said something to me. Maybe it was something great. Maybe it was during the game.

We watch friends play indoor soccer every Thursday night. It's a casual group get-together thing—no pressure or undercurrents of hookup intent, though I did date this one guy, Adam, for a while. He's a forward, and we both love John Lennon. He said to me when we met, "You seem like the intellectual type."

I said, "It's intentional. Because women love to be 'types.'"

We shared grapefruit in the afternoons and traded lines from *Help!* while he talked about his interest in collecting self-portraits and steel guitars, but the relationship didn't pan out. When we broke up before the next game he told me I was snarky and mean, and I asked him if he had a point. Afterwards a born-again Christian girl on the team who'd once had her eye on John told me I should never date a guy named Adam.

"It's the name of the first man," she said, "so he embodies the vices of all men."

"What's a good name?" I kind of liked where this was headed.

"John. That's who Jesus loved best." My mouth twitched. She continued, "Or Anselm, which means 'Helmet of God.' A protector."

Spasm of jealousy aside, I decided not to completely avoid her and kept going to the games. I started meeting up with John and some others in the bleachers, and we'd spot the usual Hildas and Blairs, talk shit and chuckle into our diet sodas. Sometimes we caught a movie afterwards but yesterday no one felt like it, so we all went to Leon's

Frozen Custard for ice cream and hot dogs and hung out until mosquitoes and a thunderstorm forced us off the picnic tables and back into our cars.

John drove me home. “Feel like watching some *Seinfeld*?”

My reply? I leaned over and pushed my tongue into his mouth.

Why did I do this? I’ve been telling myself that the smell of rain on his skin made me wonder what I could get away with. Though it would be hard to say that the atmosphere of bleachers at sporting events—the seedy “under” explored by many popular songs and Hollywood movies that juxtaposes schoolyard innocence and the possibility of sex in public—wasn’t incentive. Or the presence of Adam’s new girlfriend, all fresh and dewy fluffy blond cashmere sweater khaki capris glittery sandals.

I know I wasn’t surprised when I did it. But I was surprised when he responded. He seemed to think it was natural. No daze-y look of shock. I’m sure we said nothing other than his whispered “Well, here we go” when he followed me inside. We didn’t even hold hands.

I should say I’m sure *I* said nothing. Nothing worth repeating, anyway. It was an even more jumbled variation of this: “I can take your coat-my house is a mess-well, not really, just some clothes on the floors-did you want something to eat?-oh, right, we already ate-what did I do with your coat?-here, let me put it by mine-water or coffee?-don’t trip over my shoes-I can’t believe I left them there, are you all right?-it smells like burnt toast but I think that’s the neighbors-they must eat toast at all times of the day-if the smell makes you hungry I can order pizza but I have leftovers in the fridge-help yourself.”

He stopped my rambling with a hug from behind, and he clapped a soft hand over my mouth. It wasn't the first time he's done this to calm me down.

Clearly, I should be borrowing sound bytes from those tell-all *Lifetime* movies and from other people's lives. (If only they'd made *When Two Friends Accidentally Have Sex*.) I need the direction and explanations more than they do.

The radio clicks on. My eyelids open. Did I set the alarm to radio? Did John? We must have—or did we have this conversation?

Rain...forty-eight degrees... I think the weatherman is only quotable because of what he's saying—because it's relevant to a lot of people. He's like universal law. I wonder how many times I'll repeat his forecast. And if he's wrong I'll act annoyed, as though he's wrecked my day. Surely I'll practice on John when he wakes up. Weather is as good a segue as any into an awkward conversation I plan to preempt with clichés and denial:

It was just one of those things, you know? It doesn't really mean anything. Let's enjoy the moment. For all we know tomorrow doesn't exist. Carpe diem.

Maybe I should tell him I want one of those relationships in which both parties avoid real feelings through the constant exchange of mix-tapes and movie recommendations. The weatherman stops talking. Cue the obnoxious station ad, the harmonious reading of the station's letters, and then, finally, a song—only quotable because of the tune:

Cracklin' Rose you're a store-bought woman.

Did I let John talk me into a crap oldies station? I must have. Maybe he believes that setting radio alarms to play annoying music inspires efficient morning alertness. I look over my shoulder and see he's still asleep. I want to lower the volume and let him stay that way. We're lying in bed like we've been together twenty years and need the rest. We're not even facing each other, but I can smell his unwashed hair and picture the moles dotting his stomach. His hand is flung across my nightstand. His loosely curled fingers twitch. They knock my glasses to the floor. The sheets are too hot. The windows are locked. The door is not open far enough. The air is stifling. John's going to either love me or hate me and either way he's going to care too much, and I'm more comfortable in a gray area right now. I need to get out.

I uncover my feet first and slide my leg off the side of the mattress. I slip on flip-flops and walk into the bathroom to put clothes on there. I move slowly so the foam bases on my shoes don't slap against my heels. I don't want to wake him. I'm staring backwards at the bed when I forget to watch where I'm stepping and kick the bathroom door hard. I nearly panic—I drop to my hands and knees to still the vibrating doorstop and then I keep still. Nothing. No sound from the bedroom. I exhale. On the floor I find a pair of my black yoga pants and John's Save the Emperor Penguin T-shirt. I wear the shirt. He can wake up and find both of us gone—he'll at least know I'm thinking of him.

Adam asked me once why life isn't real in books or movies, because bad things do happen sometimes for no reason and with no good deed as counterweight. Sometimes, in real life, the good guy is a loser in circumstance. I've probably recycled this quote on at least fifteen people—and everyone murmured how true it was.

I'm standing by the front door, feeling like I should accomplish something even though I can't solve the John problem. Or maybe *because* I can't solve the John problem.

I can't justify simply taking a walk: especially with the rain, I need a purpose. But if I ride a bus into town, I'm constrained to their timetables and have to pick a return time—and, anyway, I can't just ride a bus. If I go to a store, I'll have to carry packages and bring them back here and unload them, because I can't just go to a store. The weight of time the situation imposes is too oppressive, and I also can't stand to be around Hildas and Blairs right now. (They're sure to crop up if I go shopping.) I have no appointments, and I don't want to see friends. And I can't stay here. Clouds block the light coming into the windows and John's shadow isn't on the wall anymore slowly rising and falling, but for some reason I still regret the oxygen he's using.

My desk is cleared off and my coffee table is covered with napkins, so I look through my purse for inspiration. I find my driver's license at the bottom, wrapped in a month-old to-do list. I grab a hooded sweatshirt off a chair. This is my plan: I'm going to the DMV. I'm going to walk from my apartment to the motor vehicle department and get my license renewed.

So how might this action be symbolic? Peer pressure pushes me into something else I don't need. I resent dependency, the "norm," gas prices, and greenhouse emissions. The act itself is a renewal of privilege and freedom. I might leave John, beyond just leaving him in bed with the radio on. ("Renewal" is the silver lining, if there is one, to the potential end of a friendship.) Or I'm initiating an era of self-improvement by staying with him, because ten years after the state's mandatory license update, I'm

getting a new photo—a new face on my right (privilege) to drive. A face that will preserve post-verygoodfriends status. A new opportunity to seize life's roads and carve a path. (Is a G-rated version of this story what we will be telling grandchildren and their attentive pet dog someday while sitting on a porch swing and eating apples off a tree?)

But enough self-reflection. The thing's expired.

It has been so for a while, actually, but today it bothers me. Today, I want to have more options.

I step into the late Friday morning mostly cloudy drizzle. The DMV is about a fifteen-minute's walk—surprisingly close to civilization. After my apartment complex sit a few blocks of two-story houses, a full-service gas station, and a dog-grooming center that also boards your pets if you go on vacation. All are indications of desire and want over necessity: basic needs are met, yes, but they go a step or two further. Those in charge wanted this side of the city developed but weren't sure what to put here, and so they had to be a little creative. I can finally hear traffic noise on Hwy 21, past the houses and rows of trees on my right. The sound overtakes the geese, and I feel slightly less alone. In reality, this side of town exists for people to drive through as they commute between Oshkosh and Omro. It's a weird kind of limbo, and today I appreciate its in-between-ness.

The rain falls more heavily. It hits the leaves above and echoes in a sustained hiss. My shoes are squashy, and my feet slip across them as I walk. Pebbles are stuck underneath my toes. My pants are soaked to the knees and sticking to my ankles. A car drives close to the curb and tosses up a wave of gutter water.

“Fuck,” I say.

Droplets roll down my thighs and I slap them to dull the tickle. I tighten the hood around my face and I can feel my hair sticking to my neck. I am beginning to smell like dirty rain as the salt-sweat from last night gets rinsed from my skin. One form of murkiness substituted for another. I put my hand over my eyes like I'm saluting someone, and ahead and past the trees, above the rooftops, I can see tall light poles scattered throughout what is probably a parking lot. The squat, brown building sits somewhere in their vicinity—this is my destination.

The DMV's presence on this side of town is incidental. It's always been here, unacknowledged first by fields that surrounded it and now by living spaces and places of business. It is best described as next door to the dog-grooming place, but a wide curve and sharp driveway separate them. You can see the building better from the highway, where it is inaccessible directly. Across the highway there is a hotel, a home improvement store, a McDonald's, and several versions of smaller chain restaurants—a hodgepodge of afterthoughts. Still, I think I can understand the planning behind it. Offering a commuter a discount on lumber on the way to work is like my offering John coffee on the way to the bed. The offer doesn't make a lot of sense, but it would've been rude not to.

It begins to pour. A family in a Chrysler minivan pulls up next to me. The driver—the father, I assume—rolls down his window half an inch. "You want an umbrella?" He doesn't offer me a ride, probably because I'm a stranger and he needs to set an example for the fat-cheeked blond kid in the backseat: *beware of unfamiliar persons*. And because I'd ruin the van's interior. I look down and realize I could wring out my hooded sweatshirt like a dishrag.

Now, I've learned to apply theories to real-life situations from studying philosophy, and I've learned to be self-analytical from studying reality television. I realize I need to feel the rain—to feel my soaking-wet self dripping into my soggy clothes. I need to feel the water pushing me further into the ground. I need self-awareness on the physical level as representation of a deeper, more intellectual awareness. I shield my eyes from the thick drops blowing into my face. The wind has picked up. “No, but thanks,” I say.

“You sure? Or I might have a poncho here.” He reaches past his wife, an annoyed-looking frizzy wide-eyes dark clothes woman, and opens the glove compartment.

“It's all right.” The rain is pelting their van so loudly I'm practically shouting. “I got up this morning just to do this.” I hold my arms out and bend my neck back so I'm facing the sky. I try to smile past contorting my face to squeeze my eyes and lips shut against the stabs of icy water. He seems convinced. I thank him again, and they drive away.

The rain really doesn't bother me, but my ears are starting to get cold in the wind. I might have taken a hat if he'd offered one. I consider stopping in the gas station to get warm, but I'd feel like an ass if I didn't buy something. I haven't got any cash on me, and I'd also feel like an ass using a card to charge a candy bar that my waterlogged clothing would soon make inedible.

The big curve—I speed up. Power walking through puddles. Sometimes I stomp hard enough to splash droplets onto my chest. A trot or a fast march, because it's impossible to jog in flip-flops. My shins feel tight, the backs of my legs are aching. It

feels like I have wet sponges attached to my feet. I have to put up a fight to move forward. I try to look up, and across the highway I see a row of cars idling at the McDonalds drive-through. Rainwater stings my eyes. Head down, elbows up for protection. I reach the sidewalk next to the parking lot and hear the squeaky-squishy noise my shoes make. Embarrassing. I stand on one foot and try to pound all the water out under the awning. The hood on my sweatshirt is plastered to my face. I lift it carefully and shake some of the stringiness out of my hair.

I push open the glass door and smell Windex. I don't know what to do. A woman with a squirt bottle and a handful of paper towels is waiting for me to move. My father would call hers a "thankless job"; my mother would call her "the salt of the earth." Soon, kids will show up with their disheveled parents and press their greasy hands and faces on the door, lick the glass. Then she'll start over. I give her a small smile, and she looks at me like she wants to give me a hug. I step quickly inside.

Ugly brown tile on the floor is covered with those plastic-rimmed rugs that bend up at the corners. It reminds me of a game room from the 1970's, not that I know what I'm talking about. Maybe I've seen one in a movie. Orange-y lights. Paneling, even. That stuff made to look like rich, dark wood. Like if you didn't look at it for more than two seconds you might be convinced this is a primo log cabin—a first-rate wooded piece of property. I crunch some salt pellets into powder as I walk away from the door.

The place is crowded with somber stares and confused glances. I count myself among the latter and head across the room to tear a number from a metal dispenser. Several people watch me, as though to discover whether I've figured out how to stand and wait while looking like I belong there. I haven't. Puddles form around my feet and I

don't know what to do with my hands. I think my nose might be running. I scrape my sleeve against it. My ears are plenty warm now. Surely the Sombers and Confuseds know it's raining—and how am I more conspicuous than the woman over there wearing pajama pants patterned with leaping sheep? Or the tall man rocking from side to side against a clear plastic partition and singing along with the radio (“Happy Birthday Sweet Sixteen”)? Is it because I seem somehow less put together than the rest? Because I have forced primal elements into a carefully rendered retro atmosphere that hints at human efficiency, and now my presence might inspire them to commit unreasonable acts?

“Man is a rational animal,” I whisper to myself. I'd be much more comfortable with John here. We'd be the sarcastic kids at the back of the cafeteria. I unzip my sweatshirt and cross my arms over Save the Emperor Penguin in bold. I hope it isn't too obvious that I'm not wearing a bra, but I'm not especially worried. I've never had much trouble concealing that fact. I glimpse the rational animals around me. I watch the three employees representing the eight stations across the room. One of them calls out a number. One of the Sombers moves to the counter.

The girls next to me talk loudly. I learn from their conversation that it is better to have sex with college guys than it is to date one. They take exaggerated breaths and say “like, I know, right?” a lot. The conversation turns a corner. They gasp, shake their heads, and flutter their fingers at the prospect of high school boys. I wish I had a two-by-four to smack them with—I consider heading over to the home improvement store. But in this weather the wood might get soggy and dull the pain.

Here's where my annoyance comes from: I can't just make myself feel superior to them. The way they simplify relationships, dumb them down to something they can cope

with through things like “retail therapy,” makes me wonder why I overcomplicate things. Even if I were to admit, like they do, that I want to be able to do more with my life, I’m not sure that I, like they can, could. Also, more than one ex has ended up with them. They’re the girls who grow up to be the wives that ex-boyfriend husbands bitch about giving money to and escape by taking the new pick-up truck “up north” to a cabin in the woods with a few six-packs of beer.

Hoping that physical space between us will represent a gap in maturity as well, I step away from them and into the man on my left.

“I’m sorry, excuse me.”

He glances down my body and smiles tightly. I tell him today is supposed to have a high of forty-eight.

He says, “Rather sultry for this time of year.” He licks his lips.

Three numbers to go, and I wonder if John is stuck listening to “Love Shack” or “In the Year 2525” while I’m stuck with this guy. Hopefully he’s still sleeping, missing out on the fact that the weatherman has changed his forecast five times already. This guy is wearing a Mr. Goodwrench hat and has yet to look me in the eyes. Still, he is someone to talk to. Someone to remind me of other options.

“License renewal?” asks the man. It occurs to me that the hat is ironic. He is also wearing a brown corduroy jacket, and his shoes are polished. Maybe I would sleep with him. Am I that girl? Was it no more than this random thought that put me in bed with John—nothing more behind the impulse? My eyes scan his body. He’s fit. His fingernails look clean, and his beard is trimmed and turning gray around his mouth.

“It’s why I got up this morning.”

He laughs. I didn't realize the truth was funny, but maybe it is. It's nice to get the feedback. I feel a little more secure. I feel like telling him I walked here, to see what he'd say, but he speaks first:

"I'm cheating on my wife."

"Why?" I feel conspicuous now as I look at his face, and I feel myself blinking with effort and more often than usual. I suddenly notice my shirt clinging to my chest and cross my arms again.

"Marriage is hard," he says.

"Anything is hard." I say it without thinking, and he grins. In a flash I get an image of what life coming home to this man must be like: a used condom in the backseat replaces lipstick on-the-collar. The man chuckles, and I take a breath. A high school-aged girl walks by with heels and a bare stomach, picking at her fingernails, obviously nervous. Probably here to take her driver's test. I don't have to look up to know the man is watching her.

"Logic can't transcend the nature of desire," I say.

He turns back to me and chuckles again. "Something like that."

Then I hear my number called, in a voice that someone would use to address a puppy, pre-newspaper swat.

I approach the counter and feel like apologizing for something. The lady who summoned me has orange lips and crazy loofah-hair that looks as though it is being rejected by the host. I wonder if this is the result of some medical condition and consider offering her some of my mother's tinctures. They must have an herb mixture for this sort

of thing, something involving wormwood or oak essence or chamomile. The lady's nametag says "Nan."

She wants to know what I'm doing here, exactly. Then she slides from cordially brisk to visibly annoyed when she discovers I haven't filled out the MV11.

"The, what?"

"It's our standard form."

"Well, Nan, where might I find the MV11?"

She points to the corner opposite the door. This corner looks especially paneled—it's probably where the shuffleboard court once was. I imagine people sitting around it on carpet swatches, doing their Paul Lind impersonations and playing the Billionaire Game of Global Enterprise, shaking their heads, "man," scratching their skin under their polyester pantsuits until Reagan's administration steps in with its pastel suits and loafers. It is funny how quickly things can change. But we're all aspiring upstarts, deep down.

It occurs to me that I am strangely preoccupied with people's clothing because I am so self-conscious about my own. It also occurs to me that I am trying mentally to reject John before he's even made an offer—or before he doesn't. Before he just gets up and leaves wordlessly, with or without breakfast. I do kind of want him to be there when I return.

Nan speaks: "Once you're ready, you can just come back up here."

MV11. My name, my other pertinent information, my purpose. I scratch my name with the chained pen provided, and some of the marks show up on the paper. I guess I want my license renewed—I've come this far.

Name. Nan. Mr. Goodwrench. John. What kind of name is “John,” anyway? It gives absolutely no sense of his personality; it’s almost neutral. He may as well be named “Person.” I look up to stretch my neck and get the attention of some guy wearing black jeans and a tank top. He grins. No, I mouth, shaking my head for emphasis. I turn back to my MV11 and make heavy indentations in the paper where the ink refuses to comply.

I walk back across the room, but Nan has two people standing at her station. I shift my weight from foot to foot and somehow manage to catch her eye. Somehow, she manages not to ignore me. She nods, ever brisk, and finishes with the other two. Further down the counter, Mr. Goodwrench gives me a little wave. He is staring vaguely at the vicinity of my hips.

John would say, “He’s quite a catch, that guy. You’re missing an opportunity.” To which I’d point him in the direction of the paradoxical finger-fluttering girls and say, “I’ve seen you out with her BFF. Why not give her a shot?”

Nan sighs and snatches the form out of my hand. Apparently, she is ready to assist me further, and according to the sign above the counter, she is happy to be of assistance. She breezes past my attempts at scrape-writing and where I’d written in “high-powered night vision goggles” under special restrictions.

“Take another number, and they’ll call you for your picture.”

“Thanks a bunch, Nan.”

I tear a number out of the dispenser and step back from the counter. Nan calls another Somber forward. The two loud girls are standing at the forms desk I’d just left, filling out their MV11s. They use their own pens, topped with wispy pink feathers. I

hope the ink is the same color as the pens because I think it might rub Nan the wrong way. The girls decide to find one of the questions hilarious. Too bad, I think, John's the kind of guy who could make me laugh about them. He'd give them names like Sparkplug and Jan and tell me how their parents are very disappointed with them. I wonder what he'd say about Nan. Probably that she's a former Soviet spy. *It just goes to show you—always act incompetent. The DMV's the perfect cover.*

Instead, he's probably still in my bed, now subconsciously absorbing selections from *The Captain and Tennille*.

Another number. Nan's on a roll, I think. But then the Somber who left the counter walks by me, muttering something about only bringing his checkbook.

Nan calls the number again. One of the girls puts her feathery pen to her lips and pouts. She reaches the counter, sets down her MV11, and strikes a pensive-ish pose in front of Nan. Nan points to a spot on the form, and the girl bends her head down to write with the pen. I see Nan sneak a look at her watch.

A man calls my number this time. He directs me to the other side of the room and points at painted footprints on the floor. "This'll take about five minutes or so. Stand there, in front of the screen." He speaks softly and gently positions the camera.

I step forward and face the camera. I have a tube of lip-gloss in my pocket, and I apply it while shaking the remaining water droplets off the ends of my hair. I pull at John's T-shirt and drop my sweatshirt at my feet. I lift my eyes from *Save the Emperor Penguin* and look into the lens.

I can't explain how I suddenly feel self-conscious, as though I'm on stage. It is only me now—no distractions, nothing to take my mind off this moment in time. There

is a blank screen behind me, and so I am the focus. The camera is pointing straight toward me, and so I am the focus. I listen for geese, for traffic, for silly giggles or suggestive laughter or signs of progress, but I hear nothing. Everything around me seems to have stopped, or at least slowed until the man in front of me is ready to take my picture. A new driver's license is the consequence, but what has motivated this action?

What is in my head shows on my face, I've been told. I'm looking at the present, at this moment, captured. And this present has to last me another ten years.

The man asks, "Ready?"

I look at the camera like I'd look at John—like I'd look at him now. I concentrate on seeing his eyes, his teeth, his big ears; hearing his voice tumble into his laugh, the phrases I remember and quote—warm, teasing phrases I can improvise because I know him that well; feeling charmed surprise at phrases I can't yet imagine, warmth on his skin, the hair on his legs with my toes. My fingertips pressing his shoulders, running across his stomach; the way he can't stop grinning when he makes me eat my words. Leftover crumbs. The paper plates, the crumpled napkins. The lug asleep in my bed, the radio playing I don't know what.

Gustav Has Glancing Blow

Gustav's next blow glances, and so he thinks maybe he's had enough already. "I am too weak to continue," he tells the man. "It wouldn't be sporting."

"It wouldn't be noble" is what he means to say.

The man's mouth opens. He touches his chin where Gustav's fist had grazed him and stares at Gustav's figure, skinny and bent, thinking that it might snap in half at any moment. Both men are panting and dripping with sweat; they are victims of the increasing humidity. Both are tourists now surrounded by a wary crowd that wonders why the small man charged the other like a drunken bull, stumbling head first into the man's fleshy belly. Those who have been a long time at the scene wonder why the man with the belly reacted with so violent a blow when the other probably had not intended to touch the man's wife—certainly not in that manner—as he struggled to pull himself up from the ground. Those who have been there longer still wonder why the small man was screaming to begin with and whether he saw the other when he threw himself, back first, onto the street curb—did he trip the man with the belly on purpose?

Gustav doesn't move. He locks into his current position in time and space and forgets the man. In his mind, he takes a snapshot of the scene and assesses it as though detached from himself as a central subject. Soon, he forgets himself completely. Such a snapshot might be found in a book reserved for a family keepsake, he thinks, and serve the purpose of indicating the page of a favorite family recipe. Such a recipe would be altered with generations of footnotes and thick black lines and the family's hope that its heirs can achieve a successful execution.

Such a family is not Gustav's.

The occasion of such a snapshot, he thinks, would be the family hero, the young son standing up for the honor of himself and his community, first learning to fight fair. Soon, the hero escapes his photographic structure and inhabits three dimensions. Now he must be fleshed out. Gustav imagines someone utterly unlike himself, with a head held high and regal, cheeks flushed with a healthy blood flow, and clothes remaining in place and spotless. The hero's shoulder tilts forward; his body folds only slightly at the waist. His muscles are flexed. One could thrust a sword into his grip and place him among the ancient relics at the museum, Gustav thinks.

Gustav washes floors and wipes glass panels at such a museum.

A museum visitor would be convinced of the hero's heroics, without question. A quiet, confident strength oozes from his pores; a healthy kind of pride shapes his stance, solid on both feet. A glance at him inspires the visitor to face his own battles in reality. The viewer turns away, feeling transformed and ready to tackle his relationship problems, his weight problems, squabbles with his neighbor, late house payments, and his rising credit card fees.

Perhaps the viewer even absorbs enough strength and bravery to go searching for the rest of his family—those who haven't died in a war.

But Gustav is not an inspiration. He does not bring about heroics, and he can never see himself as the hero. The air alone has absorbed the full impact of his fist. At most he has cut a cloud in half and left the atmosphere slightly disturbed.

The image dissolves in his brain. The snapshot and the hero disappear. Once again he remembers his own body. He stares up at the man facing him—the man he has

just attempted to strike and then missed striking. The man stands upright and stiffens. Red splotches color his face and neck. Air escapes from his fleshy cheek as he continues to contemplate the slanting brush of a mishandled fist. Gustav's fist is suspended in the air directly in front of the man's wide belly, where buttons most desperately force his striped shirt together. Gustav pulls his fist away from the man and cradles it in his other hand. His hair flops across his pale forehead, and he passes his tongue over dry lips. He untwists two pieces of the kite string tied tightly around his curled fingers. He is still bent over. "The air is damp; it makes me slow," he explains to the man.

"I am in pain, always" is what he means to say.

The man has his mouth open, but the indignations put forth by his brain stop in his throat. He presses his lips together, breathes, and opens his mouth again. Nothing. He repeats these actions. Nothing again. Gustav nods and straightens his body. He touches his jaw where he'd felt the man strike him earlier and nods again. "You win," he says. Nothing more than a playground tussle, like when he was young. Who gets to be king of this patch of grass? The man stares at him with something like a mix of pity and fear. His body is rigid and trembling; the American flag pin on his lapel wavers. He drops a plastic bag to the ground, and something inside it shatters. Suddenly, Gustav notices the woman next to the man. She's wearing a denim dress with red, white, and blue gingham flowers sewn across her heavy chest. Rhinestone stripes have been bedazzled up and down her arms. She quickly snatches the fallen bag and holds it to her chest. Her eyes are closed, her mouth pulled downward. The man hardly blinks, though his eyelashes are thick. Gustav thinks he'd never keep his eyes open with such lashes. He thinks his eyelids would collapse under the weight.

“Really, we both win,” he says. He feels nothing but a dull pulse of pain in his jaw. The big pain is blissfully gone. He places the two pieces of kite string from his fingers onto the man’s forearm. “Thank you, I don’t need these anymore,” he says to the man. “Thank you. Please remember what you’ve done for me.”

The man flinches, and Gustav steps back from him. He’s wearing my jacket, Gustav thinks for a moment, and he stretches his hands out toward the man before correcting himself.

A hazard of pausing to consider the hero in his mind: he forgets both himself and his clothing.

“My mistake—I have worn my jacket,” he says. He bows in apology to the man, who has ducked through the low alley and is now running down the middle of the street, dodging bumps and dips in the cobblestones, and gripping the woman’s hand. Gustav waves to them. Have I been so uncivil? he wonders. He steps forward and accidentally kicks the broken pieces in the bag. A green liquid—absinthe, probably—collects in one corner. The woman has left it behind.

Gustav pulls the rest of the string from his fingers, tests its tautness, and slides the better strands into a Mason jar he’d brought with him from his aunt’s house. He labels it for later with a piece of masking tape. The jar is more the size for jellies than for pickles or pickled beets or eggs, and so it fits into his jacket, which he indeed is wearing. He scratches “4 p.m.” into the tape with a stickpin tip because he can’t find a pen.

He doesn’t wear a watch, and so the time is only an estimate.

He weaves the pin back through the fabric lining his jacket, making different holes this time so the pin does not slip through and fall and go missing inside the lining or on the ground.

The stickpin has many uses, and he might need it later.

Then he inspects his fingers. The welts should last a while, he thinks, though already he can imagine the big pain sneaking up before very long, like the echo of footfalls approaching down an empty hallway. His fingers throb, and his skin tingles as blood rushes back into the swollen fingertips. He taps his fingers on his thighs. The throbbing is sharper when the welts hit his legs, and so he scrapes them against his pants fabric, just to test the sensation. The fabric is thin but stiff, and so he winces. Good thing, he thinks. He can do this for a while before applying fresh kite string—kite string that hasn't been overused, because he finds such string to be stretched out and softened and not suitable for the task he requires. The welts created from fresh string, he finds, run deeper and last longer. He has his current welts plus the pain in his jaw to distract him from the big pain for now.

The dampness in the air thickens and swirls above streetlamps and through the orange and yellow glow of the city buildings, smudging their sharp lines and beautiful carvings into gleaming fuzz. Pinks and whites on one building look soft like cake frosting; light and dark greens on another remind Gustav of childhood, of the algae masses covering lakes in the summertime that he'd split apart by rowboat before dropping in a fishing line. The sculptures atop the buildings blur into vague suggestions of darker darkness. A hazy bubble surrounds every source of light: lamps, windows,

storefronts, open doorways, and even the lit ends of cigarettes. The air is heavy, and it blends the colors of the paintings on building fronts with mist and selects a dominant hue. The mist gathers different colors as it passes through sections of the city. People are wading through thick blues, purples, and yellows.

Here, above Gustav, it settles on shades of peculiar greens. A pea green, like the soup his aunt used to cook and stir with chunks of pork fat when he was a kid. Or a pastel version of sea foam green, like paint chips flaking off an old, rusty machine in a warehouse.

The atmosphere can't make up its mind.

Gustav breathes in the mist and thinks this must be the color of his body on the inside. It is unnatural enough to be so. "Pain is not manufactured by the body," he has explained to himself before. "Rather, it is a force that has invaded it."

"There might be nothing I can do about it" is what he means.

He explains such things to himself in an effort to understand them.

He feels the damp green color congeal with his blood and surround his organs and force itself through veins and arteries in his arms and legs. It soaks into the marrow in his bones and sparks his nerve endings. This is what makes me slow, he thinks, this is what I have to push back outside. The green is worse when it is damp because it works its way inside more easily. It is absorbed through the pores.

Can I escape it? he wonders.

He wonders this often.

Surely the purples and blues are more soothing, he thinks. Veins look blue under his skin, and in pictures he has seen a purple tinge to the liver and kidneys. They are

more natural colors for inside a body, he thinks. Gustav jogs down a narrow twist in an alley, past crooked storefronts with their heavy doors and through crowds that occupy the streets rather than the sidewalks. He gets to an open space, and he stops. He is on a main road, but he forgets which one. He stretches his neck to look for a street sign on the side of a corner building. He doesn't see one.

He touches his breast pocket. Next to the Mason jar are a map and a list of addresses he'd torn from a phone book in his hotel. The residents of these addresses share his last name; Gustav is hopeful regarding them. He reaches inside his jacket but looks up at the same time. His hand falls to his side. The green mist still surrounds him; it has grown thicker. First, this must be dealt with—it insists on having his attention. I can't see anyone when I am like this, he thinks, I can barely walk straight. They'll think I am drunk or crazy.

“I am not crazy,” he says.

“I've stopped my life until I can feel better” is what he means.

The green swirls around him at a quickening pace. Gustav catches his breath; he feels the dampness flow down into his lungs. He forgets his jaw and the welts on his fingers, and he feels the muscles above his shoulder blades begin to twitch. The spasms grow steadily louder, like pulses in his ears, and then like bass drums pounding inside his skull. He squeezes one of his fingers and remembers the throbbing, and so the big pain begins to drift back down below his body's surface. He rubs the finger against his stiff pants fabric, and the big pain descends still further. He rubs it harder and feels a burning sensation along with the throbbing welts.

I am going to be all right, he thinks. For a moment, he believes he has some control.

But above him the green fog swirls fast and faster in the breeze. He feels it begin to swirl inside his body, too. Under the red blood, white bone, and the pink and yellow guts, he thinks, this is my color. He squeezes two of his fingers. He holds them up to his face and imagines he can see them throb. A rhythmic pain. The rhythm comes from here—not the drumming inside his skull. He bites into the welts and gives a little cry. He is sweating, and he pants. People stare.

“It’s okay,” he says to them, curling his fingers in front of his face. “It’s really going to be okay now.”

“I hope it’s going to be okay” he means to say.

His relief is only temporary—less than temporary. It is a spark, a glance into the lives of the pain-free, and a teasing glimmer of a hope as to how his quality of life could be. The rhythm of the welts in his fingers matches the rhythm of the spasms above his shoulder blades and somehow makes it louder. He pinches the skin on either side of his neck and feels hard lumps beneath it. Some of the green is stuck here, he thinks, right under here, and so he pushes on the lumps. They do not move or shrink. He opens his hand and slaps them; people around him step back. He hits the lumps roughly with his fist; people walk away. The lumps will not burst. Pain shoots out of them—Gustav pictures the pain as tightly-wound threads spinning out from an unearthly green spool—and dashes up the side of his face, across the back of his neck, and down his spine.

“What can I do?” he cries. “How can I let it out?” His body folds in on itself: a weak stance of shame.

“Can I ever escape it?” is what he means.

People passing by him lower their eyes and hurry. Fast dance music blares from a storefront, and the wind picks up.

Gustav can't exist with everything moving so quickly—the haze, the pain, the city itself. He was always a little slow; his body gave out every time he approached an opportunity for greatness. Caught fish at the end of his pole pulled him into the water, and faster boys tripped him across the finish line in gym class. Flopping onto the ground and grabbing at the faster boys' ankles with the intent to twist became his method of fighting in the schoolyard. He learned very young that he couldn't keep up with others. He never could, and so his aunt took care of him. She pushed him on the swings when his legs were too weak to pump him higher, and she balanced the seesaw so his feet could touch the ground. She cleaned his knee scrapes, washed his flannel sheets, and packed apples and celery to balance out the chocolate cupcakes in his lunches. She drove him to his job interview at the museum.

She still takes care of him.

She tells him to be noble like his parents. “They died in a war,” she says.

He doesn't know which war. He asks her sometimes.

She will not tell him.

He doesn't believe that they are dead.

The spool does not stop spinning pain, and the threads across Gustav's shoulders and neck tighten. He wonders if the spool has changed direction, if it is now winding the threads it has loosened. The threads are pulling his face down and his shoulders in,

crushing them into his neck. He doubles over and freezes the scene in his mind. He examines its details with a philosopher's disinterest.

This time, the hero of the snapshot too is doubled over, but Gustav thinks the hero only appears to be injured: he is in reality gathering his strength before making a final pounce on his enemy. His noble head is bowed and his shoulders slumped, but his legs—his core, his values—remain strong. The occasion for this snapshot is a true test of honor and abilities. Such an occasion marks the first time the hero has wanted to give up. The enemy is no longer a mere outside force; he has invaded the hero's inner workings. And so the hero must fight himself—man against self. A noble cause indeed: fight the demon within, the invading force. Family and community cannot help him now. Though the hero is a slave to the preservation of their honor and is inspired by their undying support, their presence is not in this snapshot. Instead, Gustav can see the pale pea green mist surrounding the hero. It illuminates his proud gaze, sparkles at the soft ends of his hair, swims at his muscular feet.

The mist is trapped under the hero's fingernails; Gustav can sense its heat below the surface, burning his raw skin. The hero's eyes are bright with the dignity of fighting through pain.

Such imagery is vivid to Gustav.

The brain can do marvelous things when its goal is misdirection.

His imagined hero has a lot to fight against. Can he pull one fingernail out, Gustav wonders, to release the haze? He pictures the green circling his fingers and twirling out of the severed tips like wisps of smoke or like steam from a teapot. Like breath escaping hot lungs through a gap between frozen lips. He imagines the slow drain

of pain as it wafts outside the hero's body, and a subsequent reassurance of numbness. A viewer would be inspired to take control, and not to accept blindly his misfortunes as mere details of his existence.

Perhaps a viewer would walk away from such an image determined to change the course of his own life.

Gustav frowns at his fingernails. He doesn't carry pliers, and so he cannot test the sensation of releasing the green. He breathes in, and more dampness clings to the inside of his chest. "Where does it come from?" he asks.

"Am I helpless?" he means.

He looks up and sees green plumes twisting in the sky. None of the people around him notice the plumes. Still, maybe someone did. Maybe someone let his own pain out earlier, before I thought to, he thinks. Maybe if I do it too, the pain will slow all of us.

"It is a force from the outside that invades the body," he reminds himself.

"There might be nothing I can do" is what he means to say.

He looks around, still hesitant to unfold his spine. A young girl in a sky-blue hat is watching him.

"Hello!" he calls and lifts an arm to wave to her. She smiles. Her round cheeks have a healthy blush, and her hair shines under her hat. Her arms and legs are plump.

"Hello there," he says again, smiling.

The girl laughs at him outright, and Gustav laughs, too. "You're very pretty with your hat," he says. Then he notices she is standing alone: the adults around her are

walking away, and no one is taking her hand. His smile fades. “Have you lost your family? Can I help you find them?”

The girl reaches for him and stumbles forward two steps before a man’s arm swoops down and captures her. The girl screams and kicks at the man.

“Wait!” Gustav cries, “Wait!” He stretches a hand toward the girl but trips over his feet, and he falls. His limbs fail him, and his head crashes into the ground. Tears of pain blind his eyes, but he is frantic to return upright. He struggles to his knees and wills himself to stand, but his body collapses sideways onto the street.

“Stop! Stop him!” he cries. But he only inspires the familiar look of pity and fear in passersby. Worse, he realizes he has drawn their attention away from the young girl’s screams.

Mentally, Gustav propels himself forward and leaps at the man, but in reality his body remains still. His muscles slacken. He tries to blink away the tears. He is defeated—too exhausted to lift his head from the ground. He can only watch.

He sees the girl bite the man’s arm. Her hat falls. She gives a piercing wail, and the arm encircles her more tightly. The man pushes his way through a crowd of milling tourists and begins to run. A few people stare after them. “I’m glad I don’t have to take her home,” jokes one of them. Gustav hears the girl’s cries, muffled by the misty atmosphere as she is carried away.

“I tried to stop him,” he says softly, desperately, more tears in his eyes.

“What have I done?” he means to say.

People step around him. He reaches in front of his sprawled and wasted body and picks up the sky-blue hat.

It begins to rain. Droplets shatter the haze and reflect the green glow off their slickness. Crowds that had earlier covered the streets have scattered. Tourists have stopped collecting used and rare books and bottles of absinthe; they are done seeking the obligatory souvenirs: garnet rings and earrings, lead crystal tumblers and decanters. The rain has slowed the economy, if only temporarily.

“Who is it for?” Gustav asked a woman who’d rushed by him earlier, pushing a small paper bag into her purse. She hadn’t looked him in the face.

“Who is it for?” he’d asked several other shoppers, all of them in a rush, all of them quick to bundle their parcels together before fighting for seated positions on a tram.

Gustav has no one to accept his garnet ring and no place for a set of tumblers at his aunt’s house.

He feels the rain droplets soak into his clothes and cool his skin. They soothe him a little. He still wants to follow the young girl, but he knows too much time has elapsed. Perhaps he can at least tell a police officer—perhaps he can move his body soon enough for that.

He lies still on the ground, but he can feel that everyone has abandoned the streets. Their bodies had been breaking apart the mist, and now he feels the density of the green more acutely. It has become one giant mass. The wind flips it in his face. He takes shallow breaths to avoid inhaling too much. He bites a finger where the welts have almost disappeared and is pleased not to feel the big pain. But I cannot fight it long this way, he thinks. It is only outside of his mind because he is preoccupied with other

thoughts. He shifts his jaw but hardly feels anything there—the wide-bellied man’s legacy is gone.

Another distraction, Gustav thinks, I need another. He takes advantage of his mind’s current preoccupation and rises to his feet, but he hesitates to straighten his back. He takes three pieces of fresh kite string from the Mason jar and loops them around his fingers. He pulls the ends with his teeth and ties them tightly. The string digs into his skin; he feels the pressure against bone, the pleasing tingle of his suffocating fingertips. He traps the blood; it cannot flow through his veins and carry more of the green haze through his body. He still thinks much of the green is under his nails. He thinks he can feel the skin underneath them burning from it. With the stickpin tip, he scratches “4 p.m.” into a new piece of tape on the jar.

The time is only an estimate.

The jar goes back into his pocket, and the pin is again pushed through the lining in his jacket.

Gustav has his reasons.

He decides he needs more human company to forget the green mist. Human distraction: independent bodies of flesh existing with their own problems in the world.

“Tell me your problems,” he’ll say, “because they are different from mine.”

“Help me forget—forever, if you can” is what he’ll mean to say.

Human beings are sovereign entities. Responsible for their actions and their respective fates, his aunt would say. Separate pieces of a big puzzle, and most easily dealt with separately, she would also say. Human companionship is what Gustav needs—or at least partly human. Human and fate. Fated to be human.

His fingers throb.

He decides to go to the church where the arm hangs, severed from a thief maybe a hundred years ago. He thinks the church is called St. James', and he shuffles his feet through the gushing rainwater to find it.

He'd read about the church before his journey—in a book his smiling co-workers at the museum had given him. They'd smiled while he unwrapped it and told him to have a terrific time, and then they smiled some more when he thanked them.

"First time going out of the country?" one of them had asked. She was a museum tour guide in the modern art section who'd helped him pronounce artists' names correctly. He'd wanted to know how to say the names because sometimes visitors ignore his broom and spray bottle and the cloth tucked into his back pocket. Sometimes they ask him where to find certain pieces, and he wants to impress them.

He'd nodded.

"Good for you," she said. She gave him the same look his aunt had worn on her face when she'd said she was proud of him for saving up his money but nervous to let him go alone.

He hadn't told any of them why he was going—he hadn't told anyone except his mother and father in his imagination.

"I am looking forward to meeting you," he said to them.

"I hope you'll want to meet me" is what he meant to say.

"I hope you'll be proud of me" is what he meant to say.

The streets are wet and empty; what cars remain no longer battle crowds wandering off the sidewalks. But edging the sidewalks are doorways full of people crouching. Gustav can see only their umbrellas, opened up like shields against him. Some quiver like big black spiders in the wind. He watches them, wondering what he should do. He wants to find a police officer. The sky-blue hat slips from his fingers and falls to his feet. A man and woman rush past; the man gestures in front of Gustav. “Thank you,” Gustav tells him. He picks up the hat and wears it because he doesn’t carry an umbrella. Water flows in streams between the cobblestones and along the curbs. He thinks the water has made the hat gray—the hat is soaked, having sat in it too long. He approaches a cluster of the umbrellas and feels people shaking their heads beneath them. This group won’t let me in, he thinks. He runs a few steps and stops and looks at another cluster. They won’t either, he thinks. He runs and stops again. He remembers the folded sheet of addresses in his jacket, but he can’t ask his family for anything right now, the way he is. Not yet. Someday, he thinks, they will be close enough to exchange favors and histories. He steps in a puddle. His socks would be soaked in his shoes, but he isn’t wearing shoes. He’s lost them.

Because of the hat, Gustav no longer senses the heaviness of the rain. But he knows it’s there because a woman is shouting about it. She stands outside a crowd of umbrellas; they will not part to let her in either. Gustav watches her. He walks toward her and does not blink his eyes—the rain streams under the hat’s brim and over his eyeballs, lips, and teeth, and it stings but also washes them clean. He wants it to soak into his body and scatter the green haze. “Can pain die?” he asks. “Can you kill it without letting it out?”

“Do I have to die with it?” is what he means.

No one responds.

He stands in front of the shouting woman and stops pulling at the kite string on his fingers. He steps closer. The woman has a large mouth and thick lips—assets, both, he thinks. She stares at him for a moment and then turns away to shout at the umbrellas again. He moves closer. He only understands her enough to know that he doesn’t understand her. She’s speaking Czech.

He touches her hair. It is that eggplant-purple color he’s seen around, on all kinds of women. All ages. He thinks this woman needs consoling and wishes he could communicate this to her. “Maybe I can help you,” he says. “You can let me try.” He wants to hold her, to press against her warmth and breathe her in, to dissolve his pain. Human closeness. “We can help each other,” he says. He wishes he could communicate this to her.

“You’re beautiful,” he says.

He means this.

She steps away from him, toward the umbrella shields, and shouts something different, more urgent, in Czech. But the clusters continue to exclude her along with him. He now regards her with empathy. The two are alone on the outskirts of the crowd. He moves into the empty space behind the woman and stretches his fingers into her hair and twirls them in circles, indicating his affection. Her hair is wet, but he feels warmth and softness.

The woman shouts at his touch and violently tries to turn her head around. Strands of her hair intermingle with the pieces of kite string and twist tightly around his

fingers. “Stop!” cries Gustav with alarm. The woman tries to turn her head again: she wrenches it to one side and then the other, and her caught hair forces her head to snap backwards, into Gustav’s chest.

Now his hands are deeper into the mess of her hair—he is touching her scalp. “Please stop!” he cries again. The woman screams and reaches up to dig her fingers in underneath his, trying to untangle them. Her head is stuck between his hands. She wears sandals and almost slips when she tries to push him away, but Gustav raises her head and keeps her upright. Her feet squeak against rubber soles. She arches her back and tries to turn her head to face him but cannot. She cannot wiggle her fingers free because Gustav’s fingers are pressed hard against them. His fingers are wet like her hair; the rain has bonded them together.

He is horrified. “You’re in pain,” he whispers, “because of me.” If only she’d hold still, he thinks, he might slide his fingers out one at a time. But his own temples are throbbing, and his heart beats quickly. His tongue is dry. His hands sweat and become stickier in her hair. He is too close to the scene; he needs to stop himself.

This time a snapshot won’t do. Gustav goes right into imagining the bodies in this scene as cast in stone among ancient relics. From the outside the museum visitor might see the beginnings of a classic romance. The bodies are fumbling because of their shared affection and their shyness. Soft-looking clothes drape their perfect forms and assume graceful shapes. Their hair flows away from their muscular necks and noble faces. The hero smiles. He has forgotten the green mist. It is a romantic scene because the two figures are sort of holding hands, and the hero bends to smell his goddess’s hair. Its perfume is thick and musky like marigolds, but it is fresh from the recent rain. His

goddess's hair is knotted, but it's soft, and the hero thinks about it falling over his face and chest as he embraces her and she submits to his arms. He thinks about it brushing across his penis as she kisses his thighs and belly with her thick lips.

Gustav visualizes the next sculpture, the scene after this one. The hero grips the goddess's head and hands tightly. He curls his fingers over hers, communicating his affection. "You're adorable," says the expression on his face. He pushes his face into her neck and breathes in her softness through the stone. His wide and strong chest is pressed against her smooth shoulder blades. She is looking down demurely, contemplating her folded hands in her lap.

He tells her, "I had a terrific idea, when I was young."

The hero stops there because he wants to impress her. He wants to make her want him, to make her want to help him, and to make her be there to support him in his noble quests. In return, he offers his protection and admiration.

The hero also stops because he doesn't want to lie to her. It is dishonorable to lie. He cannot trick this innocent creature into being with him—her desire must be pure—and so he stops himself from rambling.

But heroes don't ramble. "When you're noble you make good decisions, and you stick to them," says Gustav's aunt. "Don't make excuses. Your parents never made excuses." Mentally, Gustav is slipping back into himself. He knows he has to explain himself to the woman before she could want to be with him and let him help her. He wants her to trust him, and he can't rely on heroics. He thinks about it, about how best to explain it.

"When I was young," Gustav says. "I had this terrific idea."

Pain tears across the welts in his fingers and a terrifying sound rings in his ears. The woman shouts again and struggles to wrench herself away. Her hair pulls. Some of it comes loose from her scalp; it comes loose in Gustav's fists, and she screams. The umbrellas do nothing but waver slightly in the breeze. The sky-blue hat does the same. They agree to take no other part in this scene.

Gustav feels the woman's urgency, and he knows he must hurry up with his story. The thoughts are clear to him because he is frightened for the woman and has forgotten his body. He continues speaking, rapidly but with deliberation, as though he is in a trance:

"I thought of it first as a form of expression. You see, I picture time—all time—running on parallel tracks, like if our lives were on parallel tracks. And if you could look at our lives on these tracks, they'd be horizontal lines with notches that mark off important life events. The notches are ages without years, so it says '13' but not '1989,' and it matches up with someone else's '13' but not '2002.' But what I thought of first was sending ideas into the earth. Because I was young, and it was a form of expression. You see, I played outside as a kid, all the time. I didn't grow up with my parents, and I wanted to find them. My aunt said they died in a war, but I still wanted to find them. I wanted to tell them my stories, and I thought I could do that through the earth. I thought the earth could give me their stories, too. We're all part of the earth, you see, it's what we have in common. I ate the plums off my aunt's trees, and I picked her cucumbers to toss with vinegar and salt and onions. The seeds and skins and peelings of everything, I buried in the earth. Because I thought there was a connection. My parents used the earth too, I was certain, and so we nourished each other. In the spring I glued leaves together

with mud and sap, and then I scratched them with a shell that fell off my aunt's necklace. She made the necklace with shells she picked up at the beach, so they were from the earth too. I took the shell, and I broke it with a stone to make more tools for scratching my words. I gathered hundreds of leaves. Hundreds of words and ideas came from those shells. But I didn't make a scroll, because that has a start and a finish. I had a spiral. I didn't want it to end."

When Gustav inhales he chokes because his mouth is dry. He opens his mouth, drawing his lips away from his gums, and lets the rainwater stream in to mix with saliva.

"Now, you see, I think the ideas can cross the tracks—the life lines on the parallel tracks," he says. "I've come here to find my family. I think they'll know me." He tries to speak again, but his voice sounds tinny and insecure and sticks to the roof of his mouth, buzzing in his ears like a fly.

The woman still cannot turn her head to look at him. Her neck goes limp, and she begins to weep. The umbrellas stare. The hat is drowning. Nobody moves.

Now I hope she knows, thinks Gustav, she might possibly even love, but she understands I'm worth saving from pain. He begins to untangle the matted hair from around his wrists and forearms but accidentally winds it tighter. The woman cries out with a gurgle; she chokes on the rain and vomits. Water gushes down the street, rushes over the stones, over their feet. It pours into the holes in Gustav's socks, pours into the holes at his ankles, and balloons the material out at his toes. It rushes against the dead skin on his heels and calluses on his toes. It tickles the hair on his ankles.

Gustav senses all of this, but he does not detect the big pain. He is reassured. He is winning that battle, at least. Between his wet feet and his pulsing and throbbing wrists, he cannot feel the big pain at all. Even its echoes are beginning to disappear.

“Thank you,” he says to the woman. “I can squash it completely—I know I can—with just a little more pressure on my arms. Stay with me. Please stay with me.” He caresses her scalp with his fingertips. He kisses her wrists and hopes she understands. He bends her backwards and rests the top of her head against his chest. “Don’t kick,” he says, “or you will fall.” Saliva runs in a stream down the side of her cheek, and she coughs. He pushes his face into her hair. He snaps at the kite string around his fingers with his teeth, catches a chunk of her hair instead, and slides it up his arm. His breathing comes fast as he pulls it tighter, tighter, and tighter, and it gloriously cuts into his skin, stinging like a blade, and the hair crunches between his teeth while strands of it slide alongside them and slice his gums, and he is delighted when his teeth make creaking noises, to think that maybe even a few of his teeth will be forced out—bloody holes in his gums would be sore for a long time and keep the big pain away—perhaps one tooth will break in half and leave bare the electric nerve, shards on which he’ll cut his tongue—teeth are exterior, so surely he can find something to numb it when the time comes—

A sharp crack reverberates across his jaw.

Gustav’s back is on the ground before he is. His brain sends him floating into the air, and he sees a snapshot of his back lying there off the curb, translucent and glowing pastel pea green. He shakes with laughter. The big pain has been torn away from him. “Ah!” he cries. His jaw has popped in and out of its socket and has effectively obscured the big pain, and the power of the strike has released his back from the cage of his skin,

muscles, guts, and cartilage. Gustav is cured—if only for an instant. He is free of it, severed from it; the pale green mist hovers above the orphan back on the ground and darts between the vertebrae and disks in the neck and spine. It shimmers and sparkles. It takes a swimmer's graceful strokes around the bones. It takes curves with the utmost fluidity. It looks almost beautiful.

But if it is free, why doesn't it spread out? Gustav wonders. He'd imagined it billowing into the air, finally tasting freedom and relishing it before evaporating into nothing, or at least emitting curled trails as with smoke off an extinguished candlewick. Nothing. How strange, he thinks. It acts as though bound by threads, tortured by demons, he thinks.

Then the image shatters, and Gustav falls to the street, onto his back, reconnecting it to his body.

The impact makes him scream.

He is the sole, feeling subject of his snapshots now. Image and reality have been fused together. Now, he cannot forget his body.

The pale green mist shapes itself into a machine—a factory machine made of haze, with sea foam green paint flaking off of its rusty body—and it forces Gustav's shoulders backwards. Its goal seems to be this: join the shoulders together behind the neck and force them into a single lump of skin and bone and nerves and vessels and veins and cartilage and connective tissues. The machine will not be satisfied with any other outcome. It raises Gustav's stomach into the air and simultaneously pushes down on his pelvis—it wants to separate the two. Gustav feels the twinge and crackle in his lower spine as the machine fixes it at a 45-degree angle. His stomach stretches and battles the

muscles in his chest; they pull with violence across the front of his shoulders and relocate his collarbone a blank space above where it should be. Meanwhile pressure on his pelvis greedily tears up his intestines and grinds his tailbone against the street. His knees and ankles intertwine as the machine sends spasms like electricity up his legs, making them writhe. Suddenly, the 45-degree angle is broken, and his head slams into the ground and folds back on itself under his neck. The machine snaps the neck and bends it sideways underneath Gustav's right shoulder. The liquids inside his head begin to swirl. His brain swims erratically like a dying fish. Then Gustav is flying, circling the glowing green atmosphere with a patch of street attached to his backside, buckled to him like a seatbelt, twirling with the fog. His neck is guiding the motion, he feels. The machine keeps the neck central, spinning the rest of the body to its whim, now counter-clockwise, tilting it downward and to the right, against equilibrium. His face gets hot. The insides of his ears throb. He imagines thick blood gushing out of his ears and nose. He imagines burning fingers belonging to the machine pressing hard against his temples. The spinning gets faster and more lopsided. He sees himself from above, body strapped to a wobbly disc and spinning as though on a warped turntable. His music is a sustained screech—too high in pitch, now, to be heard by human ears. Gustav tilts further and further askew, but the machine creates a force that shoves against his body and prevents a total flip onto his side. Darkness starts to crowd his vision and blots out the green. He feels the dampness re-enter his body. It suffocates his nasal passages and throat. He gurgles and manages to yell a long note, lower this time, and he reaches up with sweaty arms to yank his head off his neck. The sky-blue hat falls to the ground, drifting a little in the breeze. Disconnect the brain, he thinks, it is the only way.

Flashes of a makeshift noose in his aunt's garage, made of rope that had secured a tarp to protect his rowboat on rainy days.

He pulls and pulls at his head, imagining the quick jerk that will sever his brain from his spinal cord. He scrapes his fingernails into the skin at his nape and yells some more.

He'd already tightened the rope securely around his neck when she walked in.

He tears his hair.

"You can't die for nothing," his aunt said.

He tries to dig in deeper, to tear his whole head away and toss it aside, down into the street.

"Your parents had honor; they died for something."

He cannot do it: the rainwater makes his head slippery, and he can't grip it. His hair slides through his fingertips. His arms fall and press tight against his sides. He is too tired to lift them, to try again. His body has failed him again. The machine pushes on both sides of his body, holding him faster to the uneven spin. The raindrops are throwing themselves off of him, scattering below the spinning disc, bursting onto the cobblestones.

"What if it never stops?" he screams.

"I want to die" is what he means.

The woman has fallen next to him, below him—he can't really tell where she is at this point—but she sits up on her knees. She holds her soaking shirt out from her chest, and a clump of hair is balled in one of her hands. She watches Gustav with something like a mix of fear and pity. Gustav looks over or down and sees her face. The machine slows the spin and makes Gustav's pelvis thrust sharply upward. Then it slams his body

back down, flat against the street. The machine repeats this motion of the body perhaps a dozen times in succession—a grotesque mime of sexual thrusting.

Gustav yells. He appeals to the woman: “What can I do?”

“I can’t do anything” he means.

His pelvis is stuck in the air along with his stomach and chest—only his feet, arms, shoulders, and head bent under his neck stay on the ground. He finally stops spinning. He is stopped on a downward tilt. He lifts his head from underneath his shoulder, and the machine stabs the back of his neck with sharp nails. He moves his jaw from side to side and feels a tense pull and a lightning bolt of pain across his face. The machine retracts its nails a little. He moves his legs to feel the aftershocks of electricity in his arteries and veins, and the machine retracts the nails a little more. The machine is falling asleep, Gustav thinks, but I am still above ground, part of the invasive atmosphere.

When he can glance to the side or down, he notices the water surrounding his hands. Gustav lifts the fingers slowly. He doesn’t want to disturb the machine and fall into the water. He wiggles his hands a little. The motions are slight, but he imagines the waves that he makes with his fingers and the turbulent tides with his wrists. The waves flow between the cobblestones and gain momentum on their way down the street. They crest and slam into cars parked in alleyways. He hears the crashing of windows and the blast of alarms. More tides rise dutifully from his body and curve away, and the weight of their water shatters storefronts. Bohemian crystal displays—advertised as such—destroyed, the glass shelves fold inward and collapse. Bits of glass bounce off the umbrellas outside. Bigger shards diminish into pellets mixed with the droplets of water falling at their feet.

More alarms sound, echoing through the atmosphere. Heavy footsteps of police officers blot the echoes and screams. The woman rises from her knees and runs to the police, shouting, but they push her aside. Gustav watches the police shove young, upright, and coherent healthy bodies out from the destroyed storefronts and tie their hands behind their backs. Several of the bodies guiltily drop wooden bats and more glass onto the ground. The glass items were decorations: beautiful candleholders, a vase, a dish for candies. A few bodies pull loose and run down the streets. The police yell something in Czech; a few officers run after the bodies, and the umbrellas tremble, hovering just above the ground.

The woman drops the clump of hair. Gustav sees her leap and feels her throw her body across his body's middle. She is saving me, he thinks. "Thank you," he says.

She has broken the machine.

Together, they tumble down from the air and into the water that has pooled beneath Gustav. He is immersed until the woman lifts his head from the street. The water slips through his skin and cools his twitching muscles; it soothes the connecting tissues. It stops his spinning and calms the green haze inside his body. It slows his breathing and pacifies his lungs.

It drowns the big pain. The machine's nails are gone..

"My expression was a spiral," he tells the woman breathlessly.

"I want you to understand what you are to me" is what he means.

He still feels the weight of her, and he forgets himself. His finger sketches a sentence, a script in the water's surface, all around his body:

Cut a gash across my chest and I won't bleed red but feel happy, dislocated; burn the tips of my ears and I won't singe but feel separate from the lurking inevitable.

He tells the woman, “We have brilliant thoughts that no one else can understand—we can hardly explain them to ourselves. We try, but others cling to the easiest conclusions they can make, and then they hear only what they can argue against.” He hopes the woman has stayed with him in the water and that he’s not just imagining her there. He wants to kiss her neck where he pulled out her hair because he knows it must have hurt her, and now he’s loosened from the machine’s grip. He wants her teeth to cut the kite string and her thick lips to suck the fading welts on his fingers; he wants the tip of her tongue to flick his penis before they make love.

In reality the woman is no longer there with him, however. She stands quietly and afraid, staring at him from the edge of the curb. She has forgotten her wet shirt, and it clings to her sagging breasts and a band of fat across her belly. Her skirt sits low on one hip. Her sandals are missing. She stares.

All the police officers have gone.

“I think my family will know me.”

“I hope they do” is what he means.

She holds the sky-blue hat, which is now gray. She has picked it up out of the water. Ribbons unravel from the hat, and she twirls them around her fingers. She stares at it. She flips it over and peels a heart-shaped sticker from the brim. She presses the sticker to her wet cheek and kisses the velvet sash. She begins to weep. “Maria,” she says quietly. The sticker falls from her cheek, and the umbrellas nod ominously.

“They will know me.”

I hope they do...

“Wheredidyou-Wheredidyou-Wheredidyou-Wheredidyou-?” the woman cries and chokes on her voice. Her body folds at the waist; the hat folds in half in her hands.

“I want to help you,” says Gustav. “You’ve helped me. The hat belongs to a young girl. I don’t know where she is.”

I couldn’t rescue her...

The woman spits into the water. “You don’t know,” she says. Gustav sees her brush raindrops from her eyelashes and rub the backs of her hands across her eyebrows. Her fingers stretch over her shoulder, and she scratches where her hair is stuck to it. Red streaks like tiger stripes appear. She shakes her eggplant-purple hair and looks around her.

The umbrellas keep up their shield. Gustav lies motionless, the water plugging his ears. A twinge in the back of his shoulder makes him hope for a ruptured eardrum.

The woman wails, a long sob that Gustav hears muted underwater. She runs away barefoot, down the street, through the piles of broken glass and the growing puddles. Rain washes away her bloody footprints. Gustav sees her reflection in the streetlamps, stretching out ahead of her and melting into the city’s dark shadows.

“4 p.m.” Gustav scratches into the tape on his Mason jar.

But this is only an estimate.

He drops the used kite string onto the street because it is too soft and worn, and he watches the rainwater carry it away. The rain is steady, but the huddling umbrellas have cleared after the worst of it, and Gustav notices some of the businesses around him are

still open. He has two options, but he is indifferent toward both and doesn't want to choose. "Nourishment or ideas?" he asks.

"It doesn't matter" is what he means.

"Fate," he says, shaking his head. "Causality." He still believes in them because it is painful not to. It is painful to believe that his decisions alone have led to this quality of life.

Unlike the actions performed by the recurring hero of his imagination, he suspects his own actions have meant nothing. The long strokes he makes with the sweeper on the museum floors, the residual lines of dirt he eases onto the dustpan, the careful folds he makes with paper towels and dry cloths in order to maximize their surface areas as he cleans the glass, his brief but pleasant conversations with visitors—all mean nothing. The young girl is gone; his concern for her means nothing. The woman is gone; his love for her means nothing. He is alive; his suicide attempt meant nothing.

His aunt says his parents died in a war. She says that means something.

He replaces the Mason jar in his pocket. The kite string tied around his wrists catches his glance, and he shakes his head again at the thought of the addresses. He can't find his family now, not like this. He wants to feel good first, not like a freak; he wants no distractions. He wants to be able to sit with them and drink a glass of beer and talk about their histories and be witty and carefree.

And yet he hopes they'll understand him—he believes they will, since he sent his stories into the earth as a child. He sent these stories, and he is sure they received them. He received theirs, too; he knows things about them he's never been told. He believes he will know his mother's face and his father's voice before they are officially introduced.

He makes up his mind to find them.

“What else do we act upon, if not belief?” he asks.

“I want my actions to have meaning” he means.

He turns a few corners to escape the main roads lined with storefronts and reemerging tourists, and then he thinks he recognizes a street name from the phonebook paper in his pocket. A place halfway down the street captures his attention: a tall white building shaped like an angular “C” with a courtyard, its wrought iron gate pushed open. He checks the address and is satisfied with the similarities. This is the very place, he believes.

He walks over uneven and cracked cobblestones to reach the intercom, his heart and temples pounding. He pushes the button with a shaky finger. “Hello?” He pronounces the name listed in the phonebook as best he can. He gets no reply and pushes the button again. “Hello?”

“Hello?” A thick accent cutting through the static.

He says his own name, stumbling over the Czech pronunciation.

The woman says something in Czech that he doesn’t understand. But he notices a movement above him, and he looks to see a woman waving out of a window four floors up. He waves back. She is smiling. He feels a connection already. Already, he can feel her protective embrace and smell mother smells like ivory soap and bread baking. He takes deep breaths while he waits to calm his nervousness.

A family, he thinks. Real snapshots, trips to graveyards and childhood homes, sketches of family trees. A big family dinner where he’ll meet aunts and uncles and cousins, and maybe he has brothers and sisters he doesn’t know about. The thought

flutters in his chest. He wants to cook for them—recipes his aunt told him had been passed through the generations. He'll tell them he's good at cooking. He'll say he'll clean for them if he can stay here because he's good at cleaning, too. He imagines their kind laughter in response to his enthusiasm.

A green door on the front of the building opens, and the woman walks toward Gustav in the courtyard, still smiling. She also has the eggplant-purple hair color, only hers is short. She wears a thin bathrobe printed with pink and orange flowers, and her feet are bare. Her skin is covered with dry patches and a little spotted from the sun, and her eyes are surrounded by crow's feet, but Gustav thinks she is beautiful. She has had a hard life, he knows, what with the war. She is the same age his mother ought to be—he knows this too.

“Student?” she asks in English. She holds up a set of keys.

“No, I work at a museum,” says Gustav. He smiles uncomfortably; he hopes he doesn't disappoint her.

He does not know how to say what he means.

The woman rustles the papers in her hands and points to a box on a form. She pronounces the name typed in the box very slowly and looks up at Gustav with a smile and her eyebrows raised, clearly looking for confirmation.

Gustav doesn't recognize the name. He shakes his head gently and keeps his eyes on hers. He realizes now the shock his sudden presence might be to her. He feels tears start to form in his eyes. He says his name again, hoping that it will trigger a memory.

But the woman only frowns and scans the sheet of paper in her hands. “No,” she murmurs. “Sorry.”

Gustav feels his opportunity passing. He doesn't know what else to do but say it exactly: "Do you have a son?"

The woman looks up from her paper. She says Gustav's name, and his heart pounds with so much nervous joy that he thinks it might burst through his chest. He holds his arms out to her and says, "Yes, it is me, yes!"

But rather than embracing him and kissing his forehead, she holds the paper out to him. "Not here," she says.

Gustav lays his hands on hers. She is preoccupied, he thinks, I must be direct. "I believe I am your son."

The woman frowns at him again and repeats his name. A glimmer of hope in Gustav's chest is snuffed out when the woman says again, "Not here." She pulls her hands away. She looks over Gustav's shoulder, and Gustav follows her glance. Two young people, tall and tanned, enter the courtyard with backpacks slung over their shoulders and strapped across their middles. The woman points to her sheet of paper and says the name in the box to them. They nod and smile at the woman and Gustav. The woman shakes their hands and gives them the keys she has been holding. She motions for them to take their bags inside the building.

Then she turns and leads Gustav back toward the gate entrance, her hand on his arm. "Not here. Sorry," she says with a small smile that holds something like regret, and he watches her walk away from him and not turn back.

The rain has slowed to a drizzle. A sense of inevitability looms over his head, swirling in the atmosphere like clouds that seem to have neither a beginning nor an end.

Such clouds overwhelm him into insignificance. Their power can splinter trees and crush buildings and carve new valleys, he thinks. They send mankind into a delusion in which predictions about them and protection from them equals control over them. They bend and shape light before extinguishing light completely. Gustav falls to his knees, unable to contemplate infinity or order in the world amid a seeming chaos.

The big pain reminds him of its presence: it darts across his shoulders, stabbing like pinpricks into his neck muscles and teasing him with what will come to pass.

“The beginnings,” he says.

“The end” he means.

He is back on a main street, and once again, he has not decided where he should go. “Either way, it will end the same,” he says.

“It doesn’t matter.” He both says it and means it this time.

His brain selects both paths, then, because it doesn’t matter:

At the bookstore they speak English and it scares him because he doesn’t want to be charged more. At the restaurant he’ll speak English and they’ll charge a cover. The wood in the bookstore is darkly stained, and he climbs a staircase to the upper level, which is a creaky floor one-third of the bottom level’s size, suspended in the air. The windows of the restaurant are open, and he sits at a table next to the door, directly in front of one window. Of course, Gustav thinks, the floor creaks, and he fantasizes about plunging through the bookstore’s layers, slipping through the cracks between the boards. Of course the wind extinguishes the candle flame, and Gustav wonders if it could pick him up and throw him against the wall across the restaurant, into the metal street signs and watering pitchers hanging there. A ladder stands at the ready, though Gustav cannot

imagine its purpose because the bookshelves are short and even he can touch the top shelf. A basket of rye bread sits in front of his right hand, next to his water, though Gustav can think only to wrap several slices in his napkin and push them into his pockets because he is not really hungry now. He approaches the alphabetically ordered books. He reads the menu. He crouches to get a better look at titles on the bottom shelf. He points to direct the waiter to a description of the potatoes his aunt had cooked for him when he was young. Everything, he thinks, sounds good. Everything, he thinks, looks good. Even the typical Kafka, he thinks. Even the typical goulash, he thinks. The seller notices him and brings him a collection of stories by women Czech writers. The waiter notices him and brings him a ceramic bowl of creamy cucumber salad. The seller's footfalls sound heavy when he walks away. The waiter's head barely nods when Gustav thinks to thank him. Swallowing his quickening breath, Gustav sees a photograph of a woman on the inside back cover. Swallowing two cucumber slices, Gustav raises his hand to ask for a beer. He touches the woman's hair in the photograph; it is the same eggplant-red, and it is long this time. He removes the onion slices from his cucumber salad and chops them with his knife because he likes onion better this way. He tears the photo off the book jacket before realizing what he is doing. He slides the chopped onion back into his salad. The photo goes into his pocket because he cannot feel the woman's hair. Another ceramic dish—this one containing potatoes—sits steaming, uneaten, in front of him because he cannot find his fork. Gustav drops the book and bends to pick it up. Gustav stabs the potato pieces with his knife, through the layers of cheese and butter and cream, and they slide off because they are cooked through. He holds onto the banister that keeps him from falling to the bottom level of the bookstore as he gets to his

feet. He brushes the curtains away from his face as they billow into the restaurant. Two young women are sitting and reading at a table below him—it was good he didn't fall through. A man and a woman are sitting and eating at the table beside him—they motion to him because they want his window pushed closed. The photo falls out of his pocket, and he looks down and then up too suddenly so that his head begins spinning on his neck; he must anchor his body to a bookshelf before the whole thing spins out of control. He recognizes the man with the wide belly and American flag pin on his lapel and turns his head to the side too suddenly; he must anchor his body to keep from spinning, and he tries to push it back against the wooden booth before it is too late. Again, the book falls to the floor. The window springs back open into the restaurant. The big pain is creeping to the surface; it peers over Gustav's shoulder. The big pain is creeping to the surface; it peers over Gustav's shoulder. He falls forward. He falls forward. The jar pushes against his chest in his pocket. The jar pushes against his chest in his pocket. He separates three pieces of the kite string from the jar and starts braiding them together. He separates three pieces of the kite string from the jar and starts braiding them together. He has learned that welts on his fingers do not last, and so he tightens the braid around his wrist, joining it to the kite string that is already there. He has learned that welts on his fingers do not last, and so he tightens the braid around his wrist, joining it to the kite string that is already there. He pulls it tighter with his teeth. He pulls it tighter with his teeth. It slips above the knobby bone on the outside of his wrist and presses against his veins. It slips above the knobby bone on the outside of his wrist and presses against his veins. Gustav bends his wrist down to increase the pressure. Gustav bends his wrist down to increase the pressure. He feels the braid burning his skin. He feels the braid burning his skin. His

hand turns purple. His hand turns purple. His fingertips tingle. His fingertips tingle. The joints stiffen. The joints stiffen. He laughs. He laughs. He claps his hand against the handrail and feels nothing. He claps his hand against the table and feels nothing. He unweaves the stickpin from inside his jacket and stabs it into his thigh. He unweaves the stickpin from inside his jacket and stabs it into his thigh. “Ah!” he says. “Ah!” he says. Bliss. Bliss. The pulsing pain guarantees relief, and Gustav sets his mind to focus first on his hand, then on his thigh. The pulsing pain guarantees relief, and Gustav sets his mind to focus first on his hand, then on his thigh. The big pain subsides, drifts back down into the body’s depths. The big pain subsides, drifts back down into the body’s depths. “What did you do to this book?” demands the seller in English, as he picks it up from the floor. “Close that damn window!” cries the man at the table, rising from his booth. The seller sees one of Gustav’s hands clenched around the photo of the woman and the other tucked underneath his waistband. The man sees Gustav slump down in his booth, ignoring the window. The seller grabs Gustav by the shirt and pulls him to his feet. The man shoves Gustav against the wooden booth with his wide belly and slams the window closed. Gustav imagines the pale green machine switching on and blowing murky haze through his body. Gustav imagines the pale green machine switching on and blowing murky haze through his body. He forgets the braid. He forgets the braid. The hero fights for his honor, he thinks. The hero fights for his honor, he thinks. No excuses. No excuses. His parents were heroes. His parents were heroes. He strikes the seller in the chest with his tingling hand—it feels like sharp pinpricks on his skin. He strikes the man across the jaw with his tingling hand—it feels like sharp pinpricks on his skin. The hero defeats his enemy, thinks Gustav. The hero defeats his enemy, thinks Gustav. But

the big pain growls and chomps at Gustav's neck, snapping it clean and making his head fall sideways. But the big pain growls and chomps at Gustav's neck, snapping it clean and making his head fall sideways. Gustav's next blow glances. Gustav's next blow glances. The machine stabs his sides with knives. The machine stabs his sides with knives. His body shakes. His body shakes. The seller crashes his fist into the top of Gustav's head, and the machine collapses his backbone into rubble. The man crashes his fist into Gustav's mouth, and collapses two of his teeth into rubble. Gustav falls to the floor. Gustav slides off the booth, onto the floor. He has bitten his tongue; he tastes the blood in his mouth. He tastes the blood in his mouth. The seller has black shoes, and Gustav kisses one of them in apology. The man's American flag pin is dangling, and Gustav reaches to fix it for him. "Get up," says the seller. "You again," says the man, peering at Gustav's face. The seller kicks him in the face. "The big pain is gone," says Gustav, "thank you again." "The big pain is bigger," says Gustav, "kick harder, sir, if you please." His backbone writhes and twists itself into a question mark while his pelvis once again is thrown into the air. His backbone writhes and twists itself into a question mark while his pelvis once again is thrown into the air. "Get out of here," growls the man. The woman's picture from the book slides out of Gustav's hand when the machine thrusts his pelvis up and down. Gustav glances helplessly at the waiter; his attempt to rise makes the liquids in his head swirl. "I'm having you arrested," says the seller, and Gustav grabs for the seller's shoe with his last bit of control. The waiter tells the man with the belly to sit down, but the man says, "I'm not going anywhere—this idiot attacked me once before." Please, thinks Gustav, and the seller crushes his purple hand with the shoe. Gustav tries to strike the man in his wide belly, but again the blow glances

and catches only the gap in his shirt, which he tears open. Gustav winces and laughs loudly. “Sir, I will ask you to leave,” says the waiter, but the man with the belly kicks Gustav in the chin. The hand feels like it is on fire while the skin feels like it is being pinched by sharp tweezers. Gustav’s upper teeth crash into the broken molars in the back of his mouth. I had expression, he thinks and writes with his fingers in the surrounding blood: *Crush me into nothing, and I will blissfully forget*. “Thank you,” he says, and forgets the big pain.

The police officer yells something at him in Czech. Gustav understands only that he is angry. His heart is pounding in his throat, and he sputters when he tries to speak. The officer yells again. Gustav stands but cannot straighten his back, and so the officer grabs him by the jacket to pull him forward. Gustav takes the list of phonebook addresses from his pocket and points to his last name, but the officer handles him roughly and the paper flutters to the ground. The Mason jar slips from his pocket and breaks. “Wait,” Gustav manages to say, but the officer only tramples the glass as he ushers Gustav down the wet streets and alleyways.

Gustav submits to fate, but he turns his head with a final sting of regret; his family is lost forever.

The storefronts they pass are dark now, and ankle-deep water rushes over the cobblestones. Everywhere he steps, Gustav splashes up droplets. Everywhere is a puddle. At some point, more police officers join them, and Gustav feels sturdy hands under his elbows and wedged into his armpits, more bodies pushing him forward. He goes limp because he finally can. Relief wraps around him like a blanket as he submits

completely to them. His head bows, his arms dangle. His swinging feet hit against muscular legs in all directions. The few people still on the streets stare at them from under their steady umbrellas.

The officers stop and set him on his feet in front of a tall, heavy door. Gustav thinks it might be the church with the severed arm—he thinks it is called St. James’—and he hopes he is right. This is the end, he thinks, but it would be nice to see the church. He tries to unfold the question mark of his spine and look up, but hints of twitching in his shoulder blades thwart the effort. He thinks instead of his broken jaw and crushed teeth and hand. The big pain will win ultimately, but he can stifle it a little longer, just so he can see the church.

They don’t enter the doors. One of the officers pulls at Gustav’s arm, and he stumbles in front of a barefoot woman with eggplant-purple hair. It is the woman who had thrown her body onto his to save him from the machine. The woman he’d wanted to save.

“Hello!” he says, surprised to recognize her. “I’ve been thinking of you.”

“It’s too late for you to save me” is what he means.

He reaches to touch her hair, her lips, her skin. Her face is red and blotchy. She has been weeping and looks exhausted. She opens her eyes wide at Gustav.

She speaks quickly to one of the officers, but the officer interrupts her. He points to the hat in her hands. By now all of the sky-blue color has washed out of it. He asks her a question once and pauses. The woman says nothing. Then the officer repeats the question. This time the woman nods. He points to Gustav. She nods again but puts her hand up, speaking rapidly. The officer pushes her aside and shakes his head. The

woman speaks more loudly. Gustav feels heavy hands on his shoulders, and his arms are twisted behind his back. The officers force his muscles to stretch against their will; neck fights collarbone, shoulders fight spine and chest. The pea green mist saturates his skin and tissues, and a searing pain makes his knees buckle. But he laughs instead of screaming. He laughs at the inevitability of it all. His body sways to fall forward, but the officers do not release him from their grip.

Good, he thinks. I no longer have to stand on my own.

The woman's eyes meet Gustav's. "No!" she cries. "No, no!"

Visibly annoyed, the officer snatches the hat from her hands and waves it in her face. He asks her the question a third time. The woman nods and stamps her foot, and again puts her hand up. The officer pushes her hand away. She collapses backwards, onto the steps in front of the door. She sobs into her lap. The officer tosses the hat next to her.

"It's okay," Gustav tells her, "it's okay now."

He means it. He feels at peace. He can die for something.

In his mind, he sees the hero one more time, cast in stone. His determined face is stretched high on a graceful neck, the soft clothes are thrown back to reveal his muscular chest. One knee is bent to the ground, and the other stretches in front of him. A hand is raised to the sky. He accepts his fate, his final duty to those who must avenge a crime. His duty toward his community, toward his family. His duty toward honor. To the museum visitor, the hero remains strong, even as his body is about to be taken away from him. He wants his body taken away from him. Failed physical strength translates into

enduring strength of character. His body buried means a closer connection to the earth—it means his stories will seep through the soil for all time, for all his family.

Nearby, the goddess swoons at her hero's fate, her eyes lamenting the sky. One hand falls softly across her forehead, and the other clutches her breast. The soft clothes are thrown back from her chest too, revealing her eternal beauty in misery.

The museum visitor walks away moved, feeling him noble and understanding her sorrow. Perhaps he will be noble too for having experienced a connection.

The pain in Gustav's back causes him to stumble and slip out of the officers' grip. One of the officers catches him under the arm before he falls and steadies him back on his feet. Gustav wishes the officer had let him fall; he doesn't want saving. He looks into the man's face with concern.

“You will put a bullet in me, correct?” he says. “Please put a bullet in me.”

A Letter

Dear N—

You write this, feeling intellectual and a little mysterious. Withholding information can have this effect. Loss of a few letters turns into a loss of vulnerability, and then into a selective loss of identity. Evasion is a shield. Also, it is an amusing practice. The telltale smirk of those who want others to know that they can, but won't, divulge. The corners of your mouth succumb.

You pause. You suddenly wish you had an old-fashioned inkwell and one of those pens shaped like a bird of prey's flight feather. Ink fills the shaft where blood used to be. Smooth, black droplets soak the page in a small semi-circle where you stop to think, pen tip positioned. Soon, the droplets dry. The pen stops flowing, and you lightly suck the tip, resting your teeth against it. Blotting paper sits nearby, its edges curling.

A few more thoughts complete this image: you, a correspondent outside of real time. Ink seeping into the grooves on your fingertips and the loose skin over your knuckles, pooling around your nailbeds. Stained skin. A smear on the side of your hand. Light smudges on the desktop and your palms. The satisfying sound of scratching on a page, the paper's slight resistance. The sharp movements that form the letters: a stab atop a lowercase "i" and a slice to cross a "t"—there is something freeing about not needing to be graceful.

But you are here, a body, occupying space outside of your mind and in front of a computer screen. The thought strikes you with surprising force: nothing is like it used to be. Here, you have no record of your process. No scraps or crumpled balls of paper left over for interested parties to collect later and examine as proof that you weren't always

so eloquent. Cut, copy, and paste eliminate all prior attempts at expression and any need to depend on posterity to discard the more revealing sections that don't correlate with an acceptable idea of you. Missing letters are not missing if they never existed.

You know who N— is. But you are also inventing this person. It is a way of protecting yourself.

Let's say it's a he, and that he's a former lover. This is better than your idea of making him a former dentist. It feels more honest and more compelling. He signifies sex instead of toothpaste.

Still, you reason, he could be both. You reason further: he needs to be both. You haven't yet broken your habit of reshaping his identity to suit you—a habit you've passed on to generations of scholars and philosophers and historians and politicians and right-wing Christians and anyone else who has wanted only scraps of him to use. They are less guilty, however; they have only their inherited knowledge of him and no knowledge of the real person. You knew N—. You might have felt some obligation to preserve him intact. You did keep some of his letters. But taking him to pieces is the only way you've ever known how to address him directly. And so you give him the disguise.

At this point, you may need to suspend your beliefs concerning your sexuality. Remember: we can't all be universal, all the time. Believe that you once were attracted to a dentist.

I miss you.

You write this, feeling a shade more vulnerable and also a little bland. What sentiment could be more generic? You don't want to have generic feelings, even if they are honest.

You ask yourself, is it an honest feeling? Seeing the bald statement in front of you inspires a grimace, and knowing you could have said something more inventive makes you squint and construct a philosophical distance between yourself and your words. This distance is useful: it means evasion. You can put off wondering whether the words are true.

The computer screen dims. You crack your un-ink-stained knuckles and think of the past.

The last time you attempted this letter (you've tried it before), N— was a real person and was alive. He was prominent and passionate, respected both as a writer and a politician, a champion of justice and prudence, and had earned as many enemies as he had friends. You'd been a visitor to his home—sublime and beautiful, is how you'd described it, just like its master—but these visits lacked the intimacy of your former years together. No longer were you schoolboys covertly planning your greatness in deserted classrooms: hiding in corners on the cold floor, sneezing from dust and mildew while you discussed history, biology, and music, exchanged poetry, and formed your debate club. Time and N—'s success demanded certain decorum. He moved in different circles. Many of his friends had never heard of you.

And then you did something bold, something foolish.

You wanted to remind N— of your schoolboy past, and so you attempted this letter. But you'd only scratched a few lines before you realized your objective was to

hurt him. Why did you want to write of the past? To awaken the sting of regret, the pain of memory as you recalled to N— very casually and offhandedly, as though taking the fact of it for granted, that you had rejected him all those years ago.

In truth, your idea was more complicated; it unfurled itself in your brain like a poisonous weed. Under the pretense of penning him an affectionate tribute from a longtime friend, you would publish a reminder of N—'s lowly origins to those who esteemed him now. You would stir in their minds the very things N— had always fought against: his inferior religious background and estrangement from his father, his childhood home set in the rough country, the epicenter of drunkenness and criminals and irrationality, an impossible distance from people of intelligence and high culture. You wanted his friends—those for whom he'd left you behind—to reject him, too. The question you'd hoped would linger in their minds: is N— good enough to be one of us? The depths of you anticipated a hard fall.

Your letter inflicted damage, but it was not severe. It provided a new focus for his enemies and fueled the pens of political cartoonists, but you were no help to their ongoing quest to get rid of him. N—'s friends were stronger. His prominence was secure.

N— himself was furious with you. You were never again in regular contact with him, and even now you ponder the cyclical nature of human behavior. Once again, you'd managed to hurt yourself worst of all.

A twinge of regret was sparked from the very kind letter he'd written your daughter to express his grief after your death. It put thoughts of this letter, still unfinished, back into your mind. You, of course, were only a mind.

N— addressed you as “friend” (another disguise, one you’d desired and always requested) to your daughter. He told her fragments of your youth together, the schoolboy days when you and he “first began to love each other.” The letter was eloquent, as always, and the sentiments tenderly expressed. N—: forever faithful and, as always, exceedingly painful for you to behold. His words, his memories, stand in direct contrast to yours. Your memoirs, compiled by your daughter from your letters and journals, speak of “the toils of youthful lusts” and their war against your soul. The pain of contrast has been preserved, since your daughter placed N—’s memories next to yours. Posterity cannot help but compare the separate accounts of your shared adolescence.

You wonder, was it a higher being that showed you a different path and the “impossibility of making a happy progress without the Divine blessing”? Was your declared godliness enough to justify your becoming “an alien” among your intimate companions and breaking your best friend’s heart? Does pioussness ever really excuse callousness? N— had to forget himself in order to forget you.

But you, like most people, probably saw only his success.

I still think of you often.

You’ve thought enough of N— to make this current leap and defy science. You’ve willed yourself to exist again, if only to assuage your guilt. You are here, in this contemporary time, with these contemporary methods, to make your response.

You wonder if the doctor N— consulted in a brightly lit room that smelled like stale tobacco and antiseptic handed him a bottle of bitter herbs and told him that letter writing is a good form of therapy. A healthy practice: getting your thoughts out of your

mind and onto a sheet of paper. N— had written you many letters when you were young; you wrote the occasional response. Always, he took the blame for your silences, begging your forgiveness for his neglect.

You wonder: did the tonic cure him of his nervous breakdowns before he married the doctor's daughter and became honorable?

No more than the church has cured you.

You discover that you can't remedy loneliness through mere written communication. The words are dead. They accompany the noise of empty clicks that don't echo off the keyboard, and they can't transcend the space between you and the computer screen. This letter was meant to explain your losing touch all those years ago and atone for your unresponsiveness. Instead, it's taking the form of a pale shadow—a poor replica of your prior attempts at intimacy through your debate club and exchanging bodies of literature. The exchange of fluids when your hands were stained from the words of a poem barely dried on the page. N— had always sent them off to you in a hurry.

You begin to realize the emptiness of both your feelings and your methods. Why attempt to reach him now, only to fill his elegant mind with your excuses? N— had found the act of burning your letters satisfying. Contemporary scholars will tell you he kept not a single one. A flash in your mind as you imagine the letters you had sent, your efforts to feel, on fire in N—'s care, as mere kindling to produce a bigger flame. Despite his impassioned political stances and faith in looking toward the past to inform the present, he claimed on this one point not to be sentimental.

This letter matters, you suddenly realize. You've given yourself the final say. This letter you've willed yourself to write will exist where the others exist no longer. N— is no longer alive to destroy your regrets; he can no longer rescue you from the label you so despised—the label you'd left him vulnerable to, despite the best efforts of homophobic biographers to protect him.

Pause.

You're much too old for this: deciphering the abstract realm, making sense of concepts through their individual manifestations, and the intimidating blank page. You ought to continue on, then, with the project of evasion. It will be far less painful.

You wonder, is “friend” really a less absurd label for N— than “dentist”?

What will you say to N— the dentist?

My shadow is shaped like you.

This inspires a small smile. You do have some poetry left.

Another pause. If you'd scratched your words with wet ink and then blotted them, you'd have physical proof that they're doubly true. Perhaps even ink stains on your desk could attest to your unspoken and untyped thoughts. The promise of some remnants would be a comfort, even if they are merely the same phrase copied three times over. After all, you should give N— credit: no one would think to quote your memoirs if you hadn't known him.

The screen in front of you dims again. You're thinking of his gentle exhalations moving the hair across your forehead and teasing your eyelashes, and the way he'd brush your neck to reach around your shoulders and give an affectionate squeeze. Of course, he

was a dentist; he had a cover. He was creating the illusion that all he wanted was to unclip the papery cloth that covered your chest from bits of tooth debris. But you knew better. He lingered over you, almost worshipful.

You were always aware of the slow recline when he adjusted the chair, the slight thrust upwards of your body while your head dipped down. The rough texture of his white coat rubbing the back of your head, the warming light on your face, the firm way he gripped your tongue with soft gauze. The joy of scheduling a follow-up appointment: he wanted to see you again.

I remember you best when I think of things I want to tell you.

You want to get more creative. You were thinking this morning, while inhabiting your contemporary body, how nice to be tall and slim like your shadow. How nice to match your shape to imprints in the sidewalk, to glide over stones and cigarette butts and dried gum, to blend seamlessly with other shadows and smoothly drift apart when your directions change. How nice to be in a constant state of fluidity and easily make transitions. How odd not to be distorted when spilling over a curb or when hit by rolling tires.

But you weren't thinking of N— then. Really, you'd thought of him in the shower. After breathing in soapy steam and scrubbing your scalp, you gathered the strands of hair that had come loose in your fist and spread them across the white tiles on the wall. You believe you would do this every morning and then brush them into the garbage: it must cut down on drain clogs.

There is much you've had to learn since visiting the current century, but you know you can't stay here. You exist only so long as you desire the writing of this letter.

In the shower you stood and let lukewarm droplets slide down your body and tickle your skin while contemplating your hair with an artist's sensibility. The hair made expressive shapes when you studied the negative spaces it created. One was like a slack sketch of a woman in a ball gown, and her skirts were twisted in the hands of a man wearing a top hat. You saw bent fingers plucking guitar strings. The slim outline of a crescent moon. Bells, large and small. Flowers, their petals both opened and closed. Everything unreachable in the blank spaces; everything a reminder of your separate paths and the path you couldn't take together then, or even now.

But then a face, stretched by gravity as though gazing at you from above while you lie flat on your back. You saw N—'s expression of concern and concentration easily filling the gaps between dark strands. Behind it: the consciousness of a fleeting passion, and perhaps the larger purpose of your lasting dental care. He'd wanted to see you again; he'd wanted to fill a cavity.

A cavity—you'd willed it. You wanted more. He touched you with more purpose and intent than either of the two women in the love poem you'd sent him as a hint of your future plans. The tingle spread from your fingertips to the bottom of your stomach. He was your respite—a solid lover with steady hands. Even the prick of the needle seemed gentle somehow, and the harsh grinding noises of the drill seemed far away. "Open," he mumbled softly from behind his mask. He tapped your chin twice when it was time to close your mouth and patted your lips with Vaseline.

And just like that the dentist costume falls away.

You lift your fingers from the keyboard and touch your lips.

I miss you, you think again. Does it still feel generic? To you it feels like everything now.

It is the only thing you can think to write:

I miss you. I miss you.

Another Letter

Dear M—

You write this when all you really want to do is lie down in your bed and dream of him. Your bed is soft like his hands, but warmer.

You consider it for only a moment: your body stretched out on the smooth sheets, your eyes closed and your mind quiet, listening for his voice. But reality is persistent, and the image fades. This letter nags you; it threatens to go unwritten if you are not awake to create it. Reluctantly, you stay in front of the computer screen and deny yourself the temptation to dream. You are terrified—the idea of this letter is terrifying. You haven't considered how to begin.

You and M— have known each other only a handful of years: it's been five years, exactly, since you occupied a desk in his classroom, a mere student grappling with Burke's sublime and beautiful and Hume's standard of taste. M— an energetic professor, happily taking apart the dogmatic subjectivity put forth by young Nietzsche fans and computer science majors' scoffs at aesthetic value. The classroom was in a former women's dormitory; there was a fireplace behind your desks, carved initials spanning the decades and the height of it.

Even now you and M— interact as though you've spent more time in each other's company than you actually have. Comments you exchange, quips and concerns, tiny jokes and flirtations, derive meaning from the more intense relationship you've created and nurtured in your separate minds.

Separate minds: for years now, you've gone home separately to dream of one another.

You wonder, is everything less true for being imaginary? Is existence necessary for reality? You and M— must at least imagine overlapping situations. They are your shared experiences; they inform your conversation and inspire your actions. You rarely misunderstand each other.

I forget whether I've already mentioned this, or just imagined it.

In truth, you've forgotten the distinction.

You were sitting in his office and telling him about a recent trip. A thought sparkled in his eyes:

“Have I mentioned...?”

You shook your head.

“I'm sure I've told you this story before,” he said to you. “How could I not have told you this story?”

His astonishment, his disbelief at your not knowing one of his stand-bys—one he's recycled many times over to the annoyance of others, you're sure—was carried through his words; it demonstrated the disconnect you hope to remedy. An idea must match its manifestation. Neither you nor M— wants to dwell in fantasy.

“Of course, you know other things about me” is what he indicated through his tone, through the arched eyebrows that creased his forehead. Otherwise you would be a stranger to him. He smiled and shrugged at his oversight. And then he told you the story. Many gaps are filled in this manner—it is quality, your time spent together.

Always, you are surprised to discover that you don't know the answer to an obvious question:

“Where is ‘home’ for you, again?” You tilted your head; you squinted your eyes as though making an effort to remember.

Always, the “again” is necessary—you can't imagine this question overlooked for all this time. Your tone, too, is necessary—one used by women relaxing on a chaise, flicking ash from a cigarette in a long holder.

What can be said about your relationship?

Neither of you smokes.

You know he hates the taste of honey; you have no idea where he grew up.

You know his favorite books are love stories set in historical contexts; you have no idea when his birthday is.

I miss wandering around the campus, wondering if I might run into you.

You'd wander often, sometimes for the scenery. Atmosphere is everything.

Springtime is the usual inspiration for lovers. Dogwoods holding their flowers for display like pink and white lace draped across their branches. Daffodils in the midst of leaf clusters, reaching upward and then turning their heads sideways to glance curiously away from each other. Purple and orange pansies thick as carpet gaze shyly from their limestone planters by the bus stops. Red and white tulips standing tall and haughty on their stems in front of the Sample Gates. You would walk thirty minutes out of your way for a look at the biggest magnolia tree you've ever seen, in full bloom.

But in your mind, you associate M— with autumn. The weather beginning to cool, the sun dipping behind the buildings and trees as the afternoons wore on. Outlines of late-summer leaves looked like shadows sprinkled over a gleam, breaking apart the mass of bright light. Once, you and M— walked around the Japanese maple in the courtyard on such an afternoon. The maple was impossible to avoid—a circle around it had been cut from the middle of the sidewalk, halfway between two buildings, and a pile of wood chips placed there to nourish the tree’s roots. The trunk had conformed to this landscape: it punctuated the center of the circle and stretched to the sky with few twists. But its branches were unruly. His feet well outside the circle, M— had to lean into you to avoid breaking twigs and scratching his face. Sharp points on the leaves brushed his skin. They were thin, tinged red, and curved downward over the more rigid parts of the tree. They lay gently against one another; they hardly rustled. Only their tips had begun to dry.

“May I walk with you?” he had asked. It was a chance meeting; it took place after the first time you left him

You said yes because his physical presence was a natural extension of his presence in your mind. You could tangle them together—you used to have that luxury.

You’d kept it in part after the first time you left him, on your last day of exams. M— was pacing outside the classroom, up and down a carpeted hallway lit by flickering fluorescent bulbs. You and three other students remained at your desks after the others had gone, still inventing answers to his questions. The first in this group to finish, you turned your bluebook upside-down atop the pile on his desk. You walked out of the room.

Past the door, you saw M— out of the corner of your eye. He stopped pacing, and his gaze rose from the floor. You had the feeling that you'd both spent the last hour and a half deciding what to say to each other. You looked toward but not at him. His gaze was on you directly: you felt it holding you somehow. Then you smiled at him, and he stepped toward you, reassured. He was wearing blue.

You laughed. "I have to tell you," you said with the air of someone performing a confidential task, "my handwriting got worse and worse as I went on." You looked into his eyes apologetically—adorably, you hoped.

His voice was soft. "You've made it hard for me," he said, the intonation somewhere between a statement and a question.

You let his words linger in their layers of meaning for a moment. It occurred to you that you could make them last, or at least communicate to him a sense of your understanding.

"Not on purpose," you said. Some time passed—enough to make you aware of the physical space between your bodies. He said nothing.

A casual atmosphere was more comfortable: you didn't know what to do with this kind of tension. You said, "Anyway, good luck" and effectively denied your contribution to it. You laughed again and it rang insincere, like a dutiful audience response after the punchline is delivered in a sitcom. Embarrassment spread across your face. Regret—even now you feel it. You moved forward to take the corner at the end of the hallway and stopped. You turned to look at him once more.

He hadn't moved.

"Bye," he whispered, with a little wave.

You weren't chosen as his teacher's aide for the next semester, but you did receive the only A+ in the class. An odd treatment, you'd thought, for a woman whose voice he compared to "a single-malt whiskey, or Lauren Bacall. Like a femme fatale in film noir." He was impressed with your knowledge of old movies.

You thought you were the favorite.

You've never spoken to him about this; you've never wanted to.

Once he stopped outside a stairwell to watch you refill a bottle in the water fountain, merely to say hello when you were finished. The person he'd been talking with passed by you and continued walking.

Another time, you'd recognized M—'s walk from across two pedestrian paths on campus. You followed him from a distance, to his office door, and greeted him with a sultry, "Well, hello."

He extended his hand to you in a hurry and ushered you into his office. You discussed books and your classes, and the conversation shifted to your travels again.

M— asked whether you get opportunities to go abroad as much as you'd like, and then he interrupted the pause before your response. "You don't have to answer that. I'm sorry if it was too personal," he said.

"It's all right," you'd said, surprised and not knowing his meaning. Once again, you tried to preserve comfort with a reply: "You can ask me anything."

"I think I just did."

You can ask me anything.

There is comfort in the idea, knowing that the things you want him to know are the things he wants to know, too. You don't have the burden of deciding alone what might be interesting about yourself. He has never been predictable to you—perhaps he is to others, but you choose not to think so.

You believe your sense of intimacy is justified. He leans in when talking to you and rubs his hands together, and there's the time you caught him staring at your breasts. Then the other time you caught him staring. And then the third time, when you'd put your hands on your hips and raised your eyebrows at him until he lifted his eyes to your face. But all the while you were smiling.

Once you met him in the carpeted hallway, and he bowed over your hand and almost kissed it. Only almost, it's true, but you felt the breath escape his mouth. Soon after that you locked gazes over a discussion of Adorno and nearly kissed his lips. It was the closest your bodies have ever been.

Who kisses over Adorno, you'd wondered, when he was a misanthrope by all accounts? What philosopher could be less romantic?

I must keep him, you decided.

"You must come back," he'd said.

You left him the second time when you graduated. A steady stream of e-mail messages sustained you that summer, and then dropped off altogether for a while. When you wrote to tell him you'd moved again, he sent you a meditation, at times quite passionate, on higher education to critique. You marked it with a sense of abandon: *You know how to whistle, don't you Steve?* You marked unclear passages and his redundancies, because you've come to expect more from him.

Correct word? you'd written at another point.

There's a lot I'm not going to be able to express here, but I know you'll understand anyway.

You look at the screen and read back your own words. *Almost*, you'd written. *Nearly*.

He almost kissed your hand; you nearly kissed his lips. You nearly had a real connection with your almost flirting.

The number of times you've thought about M—: at least once every night for the past five years.

The number of times you've divulged personal information: nearly three. He asked if you ever saw one of your former classmates—a young man you were still friends with, he knew. He meant: are you with him? Do you sleep with him? You said that it had been more than a year since you've seen the man.

Twice, M— almost mentioned his recent divorce: “My former sister-in-law,” he said. “It's not that I have to sell, it is just too much for one person,” he said.

Almost.

Number of times you've physically touched: exactly three. Each time, he took your hand.

My Collector

(an excerpt)

“My collector,” I said, and he laughed.

We drank sparkling water on ice in red glasses to drown the sweltering late summer that drifted into the kitchen and settled inside our mouths. The cold liquid stung my throat and burned inside my chest; bubbles lingered on my tongue before they burst. I shivered as my collector motioned me forward. My foot disturbed a patch of sunlight on the tiled floor, and I suddenly felt like a sliver of ice dropped into an open flame. The air was saturated with heat. Through the bent light I could see it rising and distorting the shapes of everything behind it: chairs stacked on a dining table, a broken sickle in the corner, an empty curio cabinet, my collector’s face. I walked through the heat and breathed it in. As I entered it, it pressed against me, gripping my body while the cold inside me dissipated.

“Not here.” My collector steered me away from a room filled with dusty heat lamps, plastic trays on wooden benches, and half-empty bags of fertilizers and dried-out potting soils—remnants of prior collections. He directed me toward the other end of the kitchen, pulling a cord to turn the window blinds against the sun as we passed. He flicked the switch on an oscillating fan, and I heard the blades whirr. I felt the hot breeze tangle my hair. His hand stuck to the back of my shirt as he guided me into a stairwell, and my feet left a damp trail of marks on the steps as I ascended them. My collector pushed me gently; he pushed me steadily. When we reached the top of the stairs, he opened a door.

“It’ll be cooler in here,” he said, passing through the doorway, passing by my side. He took short, quick steps. Halfway across the room, he turned a chair to face me and sat down.

The air inside the room was slightly cooler and lifted the heat from my skin. Tiny particles muted the sunlight and swirled as though someone had just beaten them out from the fibers of several rugs or brushed them off a large chandelier. I sneezed and wiped my eyes with the back of my hand. In reality there weren’t any rugs or chandeliers; there was merely my collector, visible through the haze and seated among a confusion of furniture and piles of boxes and books. I felt him watching me and started to follow his path. But just inside the doorway, I caught his gaze and stopped where I stood, swinging the door closed behind me with my foot. A collection ought to be taken in all at once, I thought. I held my glass to my shoulder and let my eyes sweep the room as I turned slowly on the ball of one foot. The air was too sticky. I twisted my hips anyway and tried to twirl. The air resisted; my body resisted. My skin squeaked against the floor, and I stumbled and looked down. More damp footprints.

My collector was amused. “You’d be a terrible dancer.”

“This room makes a terrible studio.”

“It’s currently a library.” He sipped from his glass. “Do you like it otherwise?”

“Yes, but it’s different than I thought it would be.”

In my imagination his library had been practical. I pictured it organized alphabetically by author or by subject and smelling of orange oil and leather. Every item predetermined for a place on the shelves, every shelf darkly stained to create a sense of richness. My collector playing perfectly the role of expert caretaker. His results

appearing meticulous to the point of obsession, but also populated with furniture that surrendered without having much asked of it: chairs that barely suppressed the curling corners of carpets and felt lumpy when used; squat wooden tables that swayed under the weight of a coaster. I imagined the kind of room he'd enter with a brass candlestick on windy summer nights, intending to settle into Aristotle and think about the formulas for tragedies and comedies; the kind of room my collector's presence alone could make cozy while the ease of his smile masked an overwhelming efficiency.

Instead—meaning, in reality—the chairs hid no vulnerabilities. They were wooden with high backs, scratched and durable if not comfortable, and a soft white sofa sat in front of a window. The walls were and smelled of cold limestone; they had never been painted. The two windows pushed open only halfway, and their screens were clotted with dust and spiderwebs. Against the gray and starkness, that white sofa was a dash of sex. Its luxury drew me to it. I sat on an armrest and glided my fingers against the material's grain, back and forth, alternating between the rough and smooth textures. On the floor no rugs covered up flaws, and rust had made a round, iron table between the sofa and chairs no longer adjustable. Boxes of all colors and sizes and condition were stacked in the corners of the room and in front of mismatched bookshelves. Each one had been opened and partly gone through: flaps were bent, covers torn, and layers of cardboard had peeled where tape was pulled away.

Sweat droplets rolled through the thinning hair on my collector's scalp and behind his ears as he sat in one of those wooden chairs and leaned forward, reaching his hands into a box methodically, book by book. His newest boxes had come from an acquaintance—a yard sale junkie who pursued his worth in other people's discards. The

man's wife had died a year ago; my collector hoped the man's insurance money didn't run out before he overcame his particular method of grieving. Always, my collector accepted the boxes—even if paint-by-number notepads or Tony Orlando record albums poked out of the sides—and arranged any books he found on an empty table. Always, he stopped sorting about halfway through the box, leaving his unfinished work in piles.

I set down my glass and watched him turn over the next book. It was a thick paperback novel with a yellow sticker that said USED on the spine, as though it had once passed through the university bookstore. He held it for several seconds, then lifted the back cover just a little and softly thumbed the pages. He stopped when he saw a note handwritten in one of the margins. He raised the book to his face, and I heard him draw in a quick breath. Open-mouthed and panting like a dog, my collector hunched over the book and stared at the writing, examining it. He stared as though he could distinguish its individual characteristics from the handwritings of forty-five thousand other students—as though he could discern a unique slant of the pen as it moved from the tall stroke of a “d” into the roundness of an “e”, from the slash across a “t” into the swoop of an “h”. He stared with the semblance of recognition. He was trying to remember. He stared, and he hoped.

I felt the pierce of envy. I wanted to interrupt. I approached him and faced him, inching my body forward until he lifted his gaze from the writing on the page. My toes thumped against the box in front of him and, finally, he noticed me. His eyebrows rose. He closed the book and set it on the box, and I slid the box aside with my foot, scraping it against the dust and dirt on the floor. I spread my collector's legs and lowered my body between them. He winked at me and then closed his eyes. My arms brushed the piled

fabric around his knees and rested on his soft thighs as I rubbed slowly then quickly, rolled my tongue and glided it around his salt-sweat taste. I felt him stiffen. I wanted him to be thinking of me, just once. He'd touched the book with such familiarity—a sensibility that was tender yet almost electric—and I wasn't sure I could compete with it.

My collector kept his eyes closed. His hands fumbled on top of my head and then fell away from me. They gripped the sides of the chair instead. My face grew warmer in the stale air surrounding it. What had been behind that wink? A secret, a shared bit of knowledge I'd thought I could ignore, just once. I'd thought I could be present in this moment as myself, beyond a representation, beyond a vessel for his memories. Fool. It was my hair he'd touched—my hair rejected by his touch because he couldn't imagine it otherwise. His fingers tightened around the chair, and his eyelids fluttered. His head tipped back. I knew I had no presence in his mind: my lips and teeth, my tongue, hands, and breath belonged to somebody else.

I lowered my gaze to the floor. Tufts of dirt-speckled dust covered its surface; flakes of dried mud and grit were caught in its seams. My eyes followed the line of the baseboards and traced a corner of the room. The floor in my imagination had matched the real floor: wood planks salt-streaked near the doorway from winter shoes, and scuffed. It was the one thing I'd guessed accurately.

My collector inhaled sharply, and I pulled away. I stopped before he came. He raised his head and cursed under his breath. I stood and watched him. I looked at him directly, unashamed, regretting nothing and challenging him to speak, but he avoided my eyes. He rose and sat halfway on the windowsill behind his chair, rolling his shoulders

back like it was painful. He moved his hand to touch himself, and I turned away and walked across the room, offering him nothing further.

I touched a leather-bound dictionary on a shelf. There were many shelves, many sagging bookcases, many piles of books. My collector had been stacking the largest pile; it stretched up and past the seat of his chair. The largest pile used to be collections of correspondence. Now it was a collection of references. I pressed the dictionary's spine forward until it fell in line with the other books. It went silently, meeting no resistance. A compilation of meanings ought to slide easily into place, I thought.

My collector was watching me, and so I stepped back across the room. I bent and picked up my glass from the table in front of him. He straightened his posture and slipped an arm around my waist. I tipped the glass to my mouth and flooded it with the cool, still sparkling liquid. The ice had begun to melt. I swallowed hard and glanced down, turning my neck to look behind where I stood. My footprints had evaporated.

“Don't spill,” said my collector.

The boy's presence had made my collector feel as though he'd happened upon some exotic bird, lingering beautiful and delicate among the autumn leaves on campus; he felt lucky to have lured it home. But as they stepped onto the driveway from the sidewalk he gently squeezed the boy's fingertips and thought, how do I keep it? How does one hold on to anything in life when moments are so fleeting? The boy's wispy hair, his light eyes and pink down-turned mouth, made him seem all the more transient—

all the more impossible. All the more desirable as he was. He tickled the young palm as he unlocked the front door. It was the boy's first visit to his house, and they were alone.

In the kitchen he reached up to slip the boy's jacket off his shoulders. "Let me know if you get cold," he said.

The boy nodded.

"Can I get you something to drink?" he asked.

"Yes, please."

My collector swung open six cupboard doors and then unlatched the curio cabinet behind the dining table, exposing clusters of possibilities on the shelves: teacups and saucers, coffee cups, mugs, juice glasses, wineglasses, margarita glasses, champagne flutes, snifters, tumblers, flasks, and several decanters. He faced the boy and motioned with his hand—a gesture that declared *this, all of this, I share with you*. "What would you like?" he asked.

"Anything, thanks." The boy was distracted, looking around my collector's house. It was very different from his mother's. No carpeting, no wallpaper. No overhead lights. Doors were ajar and windows open, letting in the fresh September air with mere traces of the stifling summer heat. Rows of empty milk bottles, with various family names etched into their glass bodies, lined the sills and reflected the sun, and bunches of dried herbs bound with string swayed above them in the breeze. A curved sickle and an apple-picker were nailed to the wall opposite. In the hallway hung a stopped cuckoo clock. The doorway across from the kitchen led into what the boy assumed was the living room, even though it had no characteristics typical of living rooms he'd ever seen— no sofa, no coffee table, no magazine rack, no television set.

Instead cane chairs and a wicker rocker sat gathering dust, along with two battered secretaries and a wide wooden table with thick legs, its grain patterned with dark brown and orange curves. Two brass lamps were in the corners; they were tabletop lamps sitting on the floor unplugged, their cords looped and secured with string. On the wide table were a small can of wood stain and a shoebox filled with yellowed postcards.

My collector called out, “Wait there, I’ll be right back.” The boy heard cupboard doors close in the kitchen; the thumping of footsteps going down a stairway dissolved in the distance. He ran his fingers along the edges of the postcards. They felt thick and dulled. They had softened with age. He lifted one by its corners and looked at the spiky handwriting.

Having fun. It rained yesterday and today, but should clear up tomorrow. See you soon. ~Marilyn

He read the message three times, wondering whether he was missing an invisible code. What remained unspoken, unwritten, and continued to be so? There was plenty of space both above and below the words; they were blanketed by silence. He thought about the writer and why she had sent the card at all. A formality: it contained nothing personal—no trace of how she’d really felt. All that stayed was her generic observation, and he would never know her whole truth. He flipped over the postcard. On the front was a sketch of a lady in a white dress holding a parasol and standing in front of sheep in a grassy field. Her head was held high, regal. The parasol protected her white skin. The boy could tell the scene was meant to be sunny, though the colors were very faint. Time had bleached the blue sky and green grass, along with the pink blush on the lady’s cheeks.

My collector came back up the stairs. He handed the boy a small glass, and the boy thanked him for it absently, his mind elsewhere.

“Do you like the house?” asked my collector. “I hoped you would.”

The boy nodded. “I like it a lot.” He felt as though important things were contained in it—as though the lives of all the people who had possessed these things converged through my collector and continued to exist untouched by time.

At his mother’s house, he never sensed anything important. His mother, who walked into furniture stores seeking the most prominent showroom displays and bought exactly what was there to the last detail. Even the pillows, the vases, the photo frames stuck to the fake walls, went home with her. She avoided deviation from normalcy by refusing to put her personal stamp on anything, and she kept reminders of no one’s past—not even her own. Of the boy’s things, she had only two objects displayed: his high school diploma, earned just over a year ago, framed and hanging on a wall next to his college acceptance letter. She’d kept nothing of his sister’s.

“Let’s go into the kitchen,” said my collector, touching a little patch of rough skin on the boy’s elbow.

They passed back through the hallway, past another room that caught the boy’s attention. It was filled with wooden benches. All the blinds on the windows had been pulled up, and plastic trays covered every flat surface. Bags of black dirt and peat moss were on the floor with measuring cups stacked next to them, and blue-stained spray bottles dangled from the edges of tabletops. “What’s all that for?” he asked.

“My azaleas,” said my collector. “They’re not doing as well as I’d hoped.” He sipped from his small glass and cleared his throat, looking at the boy.

The boy lowered his eyes and sniffed the liquid in his glass.

“It’s sherry. I hope you like it.”

The boy took a sip that barely wetted the tip of his tongue. He licked his lips.

My collector continued to watch him. “Do you know about wines?”

“Not really. It tastes strong, but it’s good.”

My collector smiled, and the boy took another, slightly larger, taste. He didn’t like alcohol and thought the sherry was leaving a syrupy coating on the roof of his mouth, but he didn’t say anything. He wanted to impress my collector. He swirled the liquid in his glass the way he’d seen actors do it in movies and said, “I’m sorry about your azaleas.”

My collector sighed. “I had to throw away several. They hardly bloomed this year, and when summer came around their stems began to split.”

“I wonder what happened.”

“I was inattentive, to put it simply.” My collector grinned at the boy. “Either the soil wasn’t acidic enough or there was too much wind exposure from the west. Or, I foolishly let them get burned by the sun in the afternoons. But I still have the orange ones that are hard to come by. I managed to acquire Fireballs last year—I’m thinking of planting them before winter comes.”

The boy nodded as though he understood.

“I also have some Golden Lights from a contact in Minnesota.”

“How many kinds do you have?”

“Tens of them. Plenty of varieties, though they’re mostly deciduous.”

A wide smile crept across the boy's face, and my collector blinked. "What is it?" he asked. "Did I say something amiss?"

"No, it's just that I've never heard anyone use 'tens' like that."

My collector's face reddened. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. It's good—I like it." The boy studied my collector for a moment: his kindly, pale blue eyes and his odd air of assumed ease coupled with a restraint of the passions. He touched my collector's arm and remembered when—after eight straight days of going to the University Archives office at noon and lingering outside, nearly walking in circles, wondering if he should go in—my collector saw it fit to go out and meet him. The boy had been fascinated by the idea of experiencing the whole history of something: the idea of words, photographs, and film all coming together to tell their different sides of the same story. But he was without a research project to justify his presence in the archives, and his curiosity didn't seem important enough. My collector invited him to lunch, and later they'd laughed about the boy's predicament over coffee.

The boy touched my collector's arm, and my collector hardly breathed. The boy tilted his head a little. "Can I see your library?" He was most interested in the library.

"Yes, yes. Yes, of course." My collector motioned to the stairwell on the other side of the kitchen. "There isn't much to it—I've only just moved out my azalea supplies. Please remember it's only the beginnings."

One year ago: my collector was meeting and falling in love with the boy, and I was dating a man in his fifties who studied galaxies through a heavy telescope. The man

had never married, and I was considering it: the juxtaposition of a loveless commitment and celestial bodies. In bed I wrapped my legs around his waist and wondered how he could find comfort in stars that burned across a gap of time and space more consequential than any human lifespan.

My mother used to say, “That’s a red flag—a man past forty who’s never been married.” She’d had a few occasions to tell me this. Months out of high school I was living with my former math teacher after he’d left his teenaged son and longtime girlfriend for a bar in Upper Michigan. I’d convinced myself that I had influenced his decision—that he had made a sacrifice for me, at least in part. We lived in a house off the main road through town, just beyond the block of burned-out lights shaped like palm trees and flamingoes, just past the neon signs advertising topless dancers and Miller Lite. In the mornings I scrubbed the bar while he went fishing, and then we ate breakfast with the other businesses owners at a restaurant that advertised air conditioning and piecrusts made from scratch. We suppressed our hangovers with pancakes and sausage, and we mixed beer with our tomato juice. I was the only woman at these breakfasts. My former teacher crunched his toast while the others told me I could earn more tips working for them.

“Double, if you dance for me,” one grinned.

My former teacher smiled at him and said, “I could save up for a truck.”

We didn’t last six months. The night I drove home, the temperature was so low it cracked the dashboard in my car.

The other men my mother had warned against were the owner of the auto shop that fixed the car and the man with the telescope—a friend of my father’s. My father had

kept a room in the man's house in Arizona; he'd abandoned us before my brother's first birthday. Later, he died when a dozing semi driver ran a red light. In his will my father left the man with the telescope some money; the man sent all of it to my brother and me, two checks enfolded in a sympathy card that was kept blank on the inside.

I moved across the country to be with him and break my mother's heart. She donated my clothes to the Salvation Army before I could pack them and insisted that the man was not innocent in my father's leaving.

"How can you forget what he did to us?" she screamed. "How can you forget what I've done for you?" She'd never set out the birthday and Christmas cards my father sent my brother and me every year, though she'd kept the enclosed gift cards.

I told her I was leaving because I take after my father: I also would rather live with the man than with her.

I packed the few things I had left—the things she hadn't been able to get rid of: toothpaste, razors, my contact lenses. She'd torn the partly used film from my camera, saying that if I was starting over, I'd better start over completely.

My mother called the house in Arizona and left messages every day for a month after I'd moved. I never answered the phone. She also sent letters—curt sentences on note cards packed into security envelopes that reported the weather and my brother's early successes in college. After a while, I stopped opening them. I could no longer smile at the anger they contained.

I didn't need her advice about the man with the telescope. I had no inclinations toward rescuing him from himself and no desire to flaunt the fantasy of a successful love story. I'd already recognized the human ability to change as the myth that it was—

perpetuated through music and literature and happy endings tacked onto movies, responsible for the misery of unrealized expectations. It's purely ego that convinces a woman that a man would do something for her he never did for anyone else. Ego coupled with a desire to feel special.

I only hoped for a comparison, I rationalized. Anything can be rationalized. Not to be thought of exclusively, but to be thought of at all. A goal far less lofty, I thought. I'd wondered whether this man with the telescope could devote himself to me the way he knelt before the sky.

There was something noble in his dedication to illusion. Examining stars that may or may not still exist was honest and much easier than examining the existence of truth. He'd limited himself to a diet of cereal and the fruit off his trees in order to afford equipment; he sustained part-time work at an insurance company and day-to-day life at his home from childhood in order to conserve time.

"Insurance," I said to him, "because you can only make predictions."

His paleness meant he reflected more light. His thinness meant he occupied less space. He hadn't rented another room since my father died, and we rarely spoke of him.

But I still felt my father's presence; I felt it through the stars. A star's presence feels eternal even if its eternity isn't real. I told the man that those bodies would still be there after he was gone, as proof that his actions hadn't impacted much on a large scale. I told him that very little would change for having known him, and any change that did occur would occupy a short-term span of time. The stars, I said, would never learn of it.

He liked believing this. His comfort lay in the mysteries he'd never solve; they confirmed that his life was inconsequential. What those celestial bodies appeared to have he never wanted for himself: he wanted nothing to do with permanence.

He said to me, "By ourselves, we—people, I mean—we can't do much." It was a question, thinly disguised. The question mark, the lift in tone at the end of the sentence, was in the way his hands brushed my shoulders and pinched the ends of my hair. For him I was a body too, but without potential.

"Of course," I said to him.

Relief in the way he shifted his hands back to the telescope.

I sat up with him on clear nights. We were far from light pollution, and my skin rippled in the cool breeze. Trees looked skeletal in the moonlight. We mostly listened to each other breathe and to the occasional chatter of javelina. Once we heard the soft rustle of an owl taking flight. Winter is our summer, I'd thought. I imagined the indoor lives of those I'd left behind in the Midwest.

The night of a lunar eclipse, I sat and twisted a dead leaf around my finger. The dried sections flecked my skin and crumbled, but the stem was still flexible. I wondered how long it could last, and under what conditions. I scratched the stem, pulling it between my fingernails, and I tried to grind it against my leg, under my thumb. I wound it tightly to my ring finger, and it cut into my skin. I let go, and it fell to the ground. My knees knocked together and I pressed my folded arms to my breasts, unsure of whether I was constructing a physical barrier or if I was simply cold.

"Is that a shooting star?" I asked. In reality, I hadn't seen anything.

The man never looked up from his eyepiece. “Satellite,” he said. He’d stopped asking me a while ago if I wanted to look through the telescope.

The darkness seemed to thicken. I heard a quiet click, and a red beam shot from the flashlight the man kept in his shirt pocket. He made notes on a legal pad he’d chained to a ladder. His grease pencil was stuck there, too, with a piece of masking tape. Sections of carpet were fixed to the ladder’s steps, and the top bar was wrapped with water pipe insulation. He rested his arms on the bar as he wrote, and then the red light disappeared. He returned to his eyepiece, and the quiet click repeated itself when he found something worth remembering. A while later I heard louder clicks as he disassembled his gear, returned eyepieces to plastic covers, and returned everything to a storage case. They were extraordinary, the tools he used. His quest was also extraordinary: an elegant pursuit of less knowledge. The man moved easily in the cool shadows. His hands fluttered in the moonlight with the grace of butterflies.

I knew he’d want to go inside soon. At that moment, I didn’t want to go with him. I didn’t think he ought to be able to leave his questions behind, pack them up for later along with his equipment. “What luxury,” I said, but he didn’t respond. No one should be able to decide when exactly he wants to feel insignificant.

I stood up and held my arms out, facing the sky with no telescope, no barriers. My head fell back, and I shrugged off the cold. I squinted and saw the stars and planets pulse; I felt my blood pulse with them. I heard it roaring in my ears. There’s no real order, I thought. No reality in the patterns. Human beings impose order; they pretend it’s universal. The spots of light in the sky were like separate heartbeats: as soon as I saw two that seemed to coincide, one slowed or the other quickened. Yet they were part of a

cohesive, living whole—they spun in their separate orbits but still spun together. My eyes closed, and I was spinning gently with them: the bodies, their rhythm guiding my body, my life here and my life at home, my mother and brother, my father, our memories, separate and together, everything all at once—until suddenly I felt the man’s heat, his evaporating sweat. My feet stumbled backwards, and he caught and held me, pressing his arm across my collarbone. He grasped my shoulder hard.

“We’re going to bed,” said the man. He flipped on the outdoor light to let his eyes adjust and then lead me into the hallway. He let go of me to put the storage case in the garage. In the hall mirror I could see red streaks where his hand had squeezed. Light bruises were the shadows of his fingertips. I heard the door close.

“You have the softest skin,” the man said into my ear. I felt his lips brush my neck.

Outside, his stumpy grease pencil rolled off the ladder and got stuck between two stones on the patio. We’d find it there the next day. His mouth tasted of the grapefruit and apricots he tugged off his backyard trees. His hair smelled like the leaves. I liked the bristly feel of his unshaven face on my neck and breasts.

But when I left him, I told him it was because his hands were rough. Hands he used to sew the buttons back on his shirts and pour scant amounts of skim milk on his cornflakes. Hands he used to scrub the silverware and pat dry scratched and chipped glasses with flour sack towels. Hands he used to grip office utensils and sign forms and deny other people’s claims. Hands he used to unsettle my hair and roll my hips forward, to manipulate equipment that could never provide answers and then pack it away tightly, hide it away, thrust it into compliant spaces. He used his hands for everything.

Meanwhile, my collector had fallen in love with the boy.

This boy was my brother.

He was newly in college, impatient, and did not sit up with my collector on long nights. He also didn't sleep—not at his mother's house or at my collector's. The boy's eyelids, the movement of his lips over his teeth, the loose strands of his long light hair, his twitchy knuckles, were restless.

“I need *The Palace of the Peacock*,” he said.

My collector blinked. “Wilson Harris, is that right?” His largest stack of books at that time was reworks and their origins. The stack had grown in size since the cupboards in the kitchen had become emptier.

A nod in response from the boy. Unspoken meaning: of course.

They stood over a pile of cardboard boxes they'd carried inside from the car and, earlier that day, from an old woman's farmhouse eight miles off U.S. 231 to the trunk. The woman had converted her barn into a bookstore but closed it several months before their arrival. My collector's information had been out of date, and the boy was annoyed with the extended detour. He was willing to compromise—to drive a little off the main roads to please my collector, and even to enjoy a little the scenery of cows grazing next to the occasional garden center end-of-season sales and golf cart shops. But he hadn't planned on donating the whole afternoon. His reaction was an extended flurry of twitchy gestures and impatient sighs. It was a typical reaction—one well established from when he was little and things didn't go his way.

The boy had wanted to take a faster highway, one that would get them to Chicago in less than four hours. He remembered the miniature rooms at the Art Institute very well and wanted to see them again: entire eras encompassed in sixty-eight representations of décor, untouched and preserved, compact and perfect. Time impossibly stilled, beyond the grip of change. He'd envied my dollhouse as a child and how my entire life seemed contained in those spaces, even as I grew further away from them. Barrettes and scraps of material, ribbons and threads from other toys scattered on the floors, across the wooden furniture, settled over time like they belonged there.

But he never saw my frustration. For him the piles of soft hair cut from the dolls' heads, the plastic strands melted on curling irons and crimping irons and hair straighteners, the nail polish stains on the carpet from when I'd painted garish lipstick and tattoos onto their bodies, and the splintered plywood from when I'd tried to knock a wall out of the dollhouse remained invisible. I'd split the wall with one of my tap shoes—it had been my mother's decision to enroll me in a dance class. A sliver slipped into my index finger from the plywood that day and never healed properly. I still had the scar.

At the barn off 231 the old woman was happy to have visitors. My collector and the boy sat with her on an enclosed porch among fading geraniums in terra cotta pots, and swirled and drank warm blackberry brandy. She and my collector discussed hardbacks and first editions and her recent trips overseas. What my collector recalled from her conversation was the seemingly endless construction of the cities she'd seen and their need to rebuild on so many pasts. He said it all sounded like home. She told him to get lost somewhere someday, looking for used bookstores, and then it is home, no matter

what else it might be. They talked about the protection of dust jackets; the anxiety their wear-and-tear nature inspires in a collector. The woman's fear of bent bindings and methods of dusting shelves so as not to grease-spot the books. My collector's former stack of writers' correspondence—his initiation into book collecting. They discussed their collector acquaintances. Neither had friends.

The boy stared out the windows at chatty sparrows and supplied one-word answers to the woman's polite questions while my collector fidgeted and smiled and passed him nervous glances. She refilled their glasses and cut slices of zucchini bread with blueberry preserves. The bread had split open on top and left two ridges like rugged mountain chains viewed from high above; the boy wondered if the woman had ever touched fast food. Sunlight drizzled out of the sky. They ate, and the boy excused himself to use the bathroom. When he'd made his way down the hallway, he stepped instead into the woman's bedroom.

The room was small, and the furniture was red-brown and heavy. A bed, a dresser, and a desk supporting a television set were the main items. The sheets were mint green—the only other color in the room—and pulled tight across the mattress. An oval mirror hung next to the desk. The boy turned away from the mirror.

On the dresser sat a silver jewelry box with claw feet and a lion carved across its hinged lid. The boy lifted the lid, his expectations shaped by the old jewelry boxes he had seen in my collector's basement—discards from what my collector acquired through his yard sale junkie acquaintance. The man was visiting often; his wife had just passed away. My collector had a growing pile of such rejected items. He usually set aside anything that wasn't a book. But the boy would go alone into the basement and look

through them. He'd spent a lot of time with the jewelry boxes, imagining where the necklaces had been bought and worn, who had given and received the rings and for what occasions. He thought he would find similar pieces in the woman's box: pearls on a strand and a cameo, gold and gaudy heirlooms, plastic beads and rhinestones like the kind sold at touristy gift shops, or even a little stick-pin with a plastic rose like his mother used to wear on her winter coat when he was little.

But there was no jewelry. Instead he found silver dollars on top of an envelope, faded a shade between pink and orange, with *D. Charles* scrawled on the outside and underlined in blue ink that had bled with age. Glue on the envelope flap was yellowed and stiff—it had been wetted once. The piece of paper inside was worn, even a little shiny, and the words looked like blue bubbles with dark shadows. But the boy could make out a few words in between the illegible spaces: *change, regret, missing, time*. He knew the woman had written this letter and that D. Charles had never read it.

“She still keeps it here,” the boy murmured. He caressed a corner of the paper with his fingers. He wondered where else the woman might keep letters never sent or received. He replaced it and laid the envelope in the box and sat down on the bed.

He understood the woman. Late in elementary school his classmates had teased him about believing in Santa Claus, and so he stopped baking cookies with me and leaving his letters next to the plate. But he kept writing the letters. On several Christmas Eves he folded his letters and concealed them behind wall clocks, between cushions, under doilies, among the pages of books. Always, he found the letters sitting on the kitchen table the next morning, unfolded. He snatched them off the table and put them between pages of a thick blue dictionary he'd gotten from our grandmother, hiding them

before either our mother or I awoke. He never asked us who found the letters, in part because he was embarrassed but mostly because he still wanted to believe. He never found out it was me—I'd wanted to save his belief. Eventually, he stopped writing the letters, when he thought he was too old to do so.

Voices drifted into the bedroom from the kitchen. The boy turned his head away. Outside, the sun continued to set. The boy sat and watched the edges of the furniture blur, and the room's shapes faded into darkness.

In the kitchen the old woman and my collector carried empty plates to the sink. My collector extended a hand to her, and she took it and kissed it with something like sympathy. Surprised, he moved to pull his hand back, but she kept her grip.

She said quietly, "I trust you'll keep them well."

He smiled with his eyes but a question mark lingered in his expression.

"Most don't," she offered as an explanation. She squeezed his fingertips. "They mark 'em up with ideas so it's someone else's problem to fix. But ideas aren't always right. Best not to leave it permanent—it lessens their value."

Unspoken: yes. My collector nodded but still did not understand, and the woman let go of his hand. Then she sent him away with everything she had left over from her former bookstore in the barn.

That night my collector stood next to the boy and longed for the boxes at their feet. They'd placed them next to each other in three long rows, adding another layer to the worn floor of the budding library. There were no stacks. My collector was afraid the cardboard would buckle under pressure. He gently pushed his foot against a side and felt

brittleness, as though the box had once been waterlogged. He imagined the old woman had stored Mason jars in there: canned tomatoes and asparagus, pickled eggs and beets, rhubarb and strawberry jam. Some of the box tops looked faded where jar lids might have pressed against them. He looked closer and saw three neat rows of light brown circles. He imagined she'd tied ribbons around the jars and given them to her family as holiday presents. The impermanence of it all, he thought, shaking his head. The contents of the jars were surely eaten by now, and soon the boxes would be recycled, effectively destroying the last physical trace of the woman's creations. He imagined her family mocking the gifts, wrinkling their noses at the homemade cheapness, and later missing them fondly after her death.

Still, his fingers itched to rip the masking tape. He desired the act of unfolding the flaps to reveal their treasures, of smoothing soft covers and dog-eared pages and mending little tears. Already he could taste the musty air, hear the stiff crackle of binding, the tight and reluctant bend after so much disuse. The paper edges worn to silky slick. The rounded bump under the spine, from cover to pages. His fingernails gliding over it slowly, with luxurious ease.

That night the boy did not share my collector's sense of pleasure. He sighed. His shoulders sank. His lips curled over his teeth when he exhaled, and he rocked on his heels from side to side. "*The Palace of the Peacock*," he reminded. His words jarred in his stomach as his body swayed. He took a breath to say something more but swallowed it, and remained silent. Right then he hated the sound of his voice.

The boy wanted to be a novelist. It was a new discovery and lately all he ever talked about, and my collector again thought he couldn't be more perfect, though he

never saw the boy write anything other than academic papers. But the boy didn't dream of fame and an easy passage into intellectual snobbery. He wanted the preservation of pasts he couldn't hold on to, the ability to create existence and examine it all at once and keep it alive.

My collector: his would-be muse.

My collector wanted the boy. The idea of existing with continuity, a collector's life organized as carefully as his collections (someday they would fall into order, and very easily, he thought) through the presence of this boy—a creator (aspiring, at least, if presently non-productive) of the items he gathered and hoarded like secret identities—was delicious. (The boy, too, had the refreshing taste of a saltwater rinse.) My collector's books, as he saw them, were extensions of himself: aspirations embodied and entombed with words. And the boy was their (aspiring) inventor. They stayed alive, he thought, in a circle, one end feeding the other, in this room. A room defined by its possibilities.

But this dingy room the boy had ceased to romanticize. Musty books made him sneeze rather than conjure up images of dedicated scholars with bloodshot eyes, warming their ink-stained fingers over candle flames, making determined scratches on pieces of parchment, and crumpling their used blotting paper. My collector's accumulating piles of boxes were piles of unfinished work and distractions. They had nothing of the precision of the Thorne rooms in Chicago, and he had yet to find my collector carving out a spot for him, a place of his own, as he'd been promised. The boy saw neither the potentials nor the inevitable failures of this room—no real lack of function behind its apparent poise, and no appreciation for the mere appearance of it.

My collector didn't know this yet. He kissed the boy hard on his mouth.

The boy pulled away and wiped his lips. "I need Conrad, too."

My collector stepped back. His fingers remained extended, in position where he'd clutched the boy's face. A sensation low in his stomach was dwindling. He thought about the two texts. Connections: there must be a parallel. Always a parallel. Always continuity. But the boy had resumed his impatient sighs, and my collector couldn't think about it now—he wanted only to please him.

"They're re-writes," was all he said.

A nod. "Yeah." Unspoken: adolescent "duh."

My collector pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and blotted the sweat from behind his ears. A sharp pain seared across his temple like a paper-cut severing a vein. He wiped his palms, put away the handkerchief, and quietly selected the two volumes that suddenly felt strange in his hands.

"Where did you get this?" I asked my collector. I stood in front of him and next to a pile of boxes, facing a bookcase that only came up to my chest.

"Which one?" He glanced over my shoulder, and I felt his hands move to my hips and pull my body closer to his.

As a response to his question, I ran my fingertips up and down the spine of a blue hardback American College dictionary that had supple graying edges. Loose threads snaked underneath and along both sides of its cover, trapped tightly by the shelf and the surrounding books. I slid it toward me. The cover itself was cloth, loose, and barely

strung to the spine, and hardened glue strands stretched over the gap like ribs that existed to protect nothing. The air around it smelled sour and like dust. I laid down the dictionary and hooked my middle finger into the first cutout along the edges of the pages. Gently, I eased the book open. A red “A” where my middle finger had been. On the page was a sketch of an anteater, its snout pushed against a hole in the ground. “Anticipation” sketched out with musical notes. The pages wavered as I turned them, one by one. They were browned with age, very thin, and nearly translucent. The Ardennes forest was drawn on a map. I read the name to my collector, and my tongue stumbled on the pronunciation. He chuckled into my ear. Artichoke: a drawing, and its scientific name italicized underneath.

“I definitely can’t pronounce this one.”

“Sound it out.” My collector grinned.

I began to flip through entire sections marked by the indentations. More drawings: a cylinder, precisely right circular. A gadfly and then an hourglass, sand shaded in. A killdeer. A lemur. A burrowing mole next to a sprig of grass. Several pages had pieces of yellowed tape holding together tears. Dried plastic flaked around the tape’s edges, and small trails of light brown had bled out from the tape and into the paper.

My collector leaned into my back. “That came from my grandmother,” he said into the back of my neck. I felt the warmth of his skin—a steady heat rising through his chest, originating from a place deep inside his body that I didn’t have access to. “She took care of me when I was young and let me copy the pictures.” I felt his moist lips on my neck, his soft breath. “I stole it from her apartment the day she died.”

I thought maybe he'd told me this story before. "A symbol of your childhood," I said. I wanted to turn round and fall against his body, wrap my own body in his arms. But I couldn't allow myself. I knew it wasn't me he wanted.

He raised his head. "And my first humble attempt at historical preservation. A sign of things to come."

"Funny, I think I've heard that before, too. The bit about preservation." I bent my head over the book. I turned it over and laid it on top of the bookshelf, splayed, and I lifted the cover on both sides until the hard glue strands that kept it connected were completely extended. "What if I ripped off the cover? Would you find anything symbolic in that?"

I made a slight movement, a quiet jerk, and a folded piece of lemon yellow stationery fell out from the middle of the pages. My collector pushed harder against me and wedged my body between his and the bookshelf. He reached over and brushed the yellow paper to the floor. He placed his hands on top of mine and pressed with a steady force. Together, we lowered the cover onto the dictionary. His fingers curled over mine and squeezed hard, separating me from the book. The pain was quick, and I let out a small gasp. Then he threw my right hand away from his and gave my left a sharp pull to turn me toward him. I was tight against him. He was panting. I could feel his tension, the tautness of all his muscles and the blood surging through his veins, and I thought he might slap me. I tried to pull away; he wouldn't let go of my hand. I couldn't look into his eyes. My tongue felt like sandpaper against the roof of my mouth. My teeth were clenched, and my jaw started to throb. The muscles in my neck and shoulders stiffened,

and I firmly closed my eyelids. When he raised my hand I flinched, but then he pushed it against his lips, and I felt him suck the scar on my left index finger.

“So we’re both good with symbolism,” my collector said. He pushed my entire finger into his mouth.

I couldn’t look at any part of him. With my free hand, I lifted and carefully turned over the dictionary. Then I picked up my glass and raised it to my mouth. A remnant of an ice cube bumped my upper lip and splashed liquid onto my cheek. The ice hit my teeth, and the water sparkled on my tongue. My collector let go of my finger and pressed his lips to the wet spots on my face. I felt his eyelashes flicker: a gentle reminder of the transience of moments. I exhaled.

I set the glass down and thought of a distraction. I wanted him, but I didn’t have the strength to play a role again. Condensation had dampened my fingers, and I flicked tiny droplets onto the floor. They spotted the sheet of yellow paper lying there. I moved my foot to step on them, but my collector lifted my chin and my gaze and set my glass on a coaster, out of my reach. His hands slid back down to my hips, and he turned my body so my back was to him once again. He guided my arm behind me, and I felt him wipe my wet hand on the front of his pants. I felt his erection. His other hand slipped beneath mine, and together we turned another page in the dictionary before he pushed on my back, forcing the bend at my waist.

I was leaning over the dictionary when he entered me. “M.” Sketch of a mockingbird, its stance proud and tail fanned.

When the boy sat in the corner at a leather-topped desk to write, he could hear my collector tackling his collection on the floor above: organizing a shelf, re-organizing the shelf, hesitating over a box, deciding to open the box, rushing through its contents, stopping at a volume of interest, and dropping heavy footfalls to place it on the shelf. My collector didn't know the boy was in the house; the boy had let himself in with a key and chose not to go upstairs.

He knew my collector would be occupied for a while. He had begun sorting through the mismatched and mislaid piles himself while my collector was at work at the university archives. Mostly, his sorting had the intention of clearing a space for himself in my collector's library—a space he'd been promised yet remained an unreality. But its effect of busying my collector was welcome too, as the boy did not want his own work interrupted.

The boy chewed the cap of a cheap ballpoint pen and scribbled a series of circles. He rubbed his forehead and then the back of his neck. My collector was distracting him. Outside, the sun was setting. Trees shifted their shadows in the darkness, and he imagined rows of birds lining the branches and settling in for the night. Soon the moon would cast a yellow glow over all of them.

He lowered his eyes back down to the desk. It's all right, he told himself. The idea doesn't need to be fully formed just yet. He shook the tension out of his arms and set the tip of the pen against a page in his notebook. With confidence, he thought. He wrote:

Re-writes: reworked ideas, the same ideas dropped into a different consciousness, time, or place, or all of the above, and left to meander along new paths, push through new obstacles, and hopefully illuminate new truths.

It was the beginning of an idea for his Honors thesis, stemming from a smaller version of it in his paper on Conrad and Harris. Several of his classmates had laughed at him for making such an early start, but they only created a divide that made him feel important. He was far from the torments he'd suffered in high school, far from the "cock-sucking fag" label, the AIDS rumors, the rainbow stickers that had effectively glued his locker shut, and the custodian's nervous glance as he'd pried it open. Here, in college, he had a new identity and could let the past slip away. Here, the boy was a scholar.

He stopped his pen. Upstairs, my collector seemed to be pacing. The boy pictured him with his head bent down and hands pressed tight against his sides to restrain them from making mistakes. He pictured my collector's feet taking quick steps, swooping past the boxes laid out in long rows on the floor, and dodging the stacks of books assembled in front of the white sofa. His hands reaching for a fresh box, then withdrawing and considering a placement option for an already sorted stack on a bookshelf. "But first I must organize the bookshelf," he'd rationalize and stack piles of books from several shelves for preliminary organization on the floor. "But I can't mix them with the already existing piles of separate editions, if this is my method of organization," he'd then rationalize and turn to look for a temporary resting place for the misfits in his hands. Or do I need to sit and sketch out a system first, he'd wonder,

realizing that any pattern he began would be a commitment for the duration of the project.

The pacing stopped. The boy gazed at the ceiling and pictured my collector turning two circles where he stood. He heard faint creaks in the floorboards and a soft swishing noise. The boy pictured him looking down at the floor. The Broadview books will have fallen from their chair by now, he thought. They will have gotten mixed in with the others. He imagined my collector's frustrated sighs. He imagined my collector's hands parting slowly from under the pile of books he'd been carrying, the decision to let them tumble to the floor, seconds before he heard a series of thuds overhead.

Silence. The boy half-closed his notebook and sat listening. Soft footfalls across the room and then more silence. He set the notebook aside and unfolded a piece of the lemon yellow stationery he'd found in one of my collector's half-empty boxes from the yard sale junkie.

I understand why she thinks I'm selfish and superficial, he wrote. I accepted every one of Mom's favors, all of her gifts, when I knew the whole time she was only giving to me what she was withholding from her daughter. What else could I do? It's not as though she was there to accept them anyway. I couldn't run away from Mom like she did—I'm not strong like she is.

I think love is selfish, in part. To have it, you have to believe you're worthy of it. And I do love the collector, in my own way.

Then the boy selected another sheet and wrote across the top of it:

D. Charles. He might have wondered why the woman fell in love with him to begin with, he was such an awkward person, closed off to the world, it seemed. Living life among dust and cardboard—silverfish his biggest enemy, the biggest threat to his livelihood. To him, there could be nothing romantic about a man who is valued in spurts for the materials he can access. Scholars appreciate him in the basement of the library when they need to, and that's it. Otherwise, he waits.

But to her, he was everything—a door or at least a window onto the kind of world she knew was lasting. They met other people, spent time with them even, but they had their shared secrets about them—about how they really felt. It was a secret world they never let anyone else into, because no one else could understand. They were the same person, really, in so many ways. When she'd save him from awkwardness at parties, it was like she was saving herself, or at least a former self she recognized in him. She loved him best then—she'd worried before about having nothing to offer, nothing to compete with the essentials he provided: a home, finances, materials to indulge her various aspirations. She knew sex could fill that role only so long.

He folded this sheet and put it at the bottom of the pile. He had nothing more to add for now. Soon enough he would have an ending.

The boy paused, rereading the first sheet of paper and keeping the tip of his pen to his notebook until an inkspot formed. Upstairs, my collector remained quiet. The boy folded the paper in half twice and left his desk. He walked down a small hallway and pushed the folded paper up under a mirror that hung snugly against the wall. As a child, the backs of mirrors had been one of his favorite hiding spots.

He passed back through the hallway, passed through the kitchen, and opened the door to the stairwell. He knew the stairs well enough to keep the lights off, and he knew which ones squeaked and where. He thought he might make it up them about halfway before getting the attention of my collector. He didn't call out a greeting, but on the ninth step he stomped his foot and stopped. Above him, he heard scurried footsteps; they got louder and louder and then light flooded the stairwell.

My collector was wide-eyed. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to see you." The boy smiled. He climbed to the top of the stairs and took my collector's hands in his as he stepped into the library.

The room was littered with books, boxes, papers, and chairs. The Broadviews had fallen to the floor—they looked like an arc of fanned playing cards. The Penguins and cheaper editions had made it into every corner. The boy's makeshift card house of Dovers was wrecked, and the rusted table on which they had stood was tilted askew. Dents covered the sides of unopened boxes, and the other boxes had their corners torn down to their contents. Stacks of open books sat atop the bookshelves and covered the curled corners of the rugs; the chairs had been moved with their seats pushed together so as to support more boxes. The boy could not take two steps in any direction without crumpling some papers or crushing a stranded record album.

My collector's face was red, and the boy could feel the tension in his fingers. He brought my collector's hands to his lips and kissed them, pressing them gently and letting his hot breath linger over them.

My collector gave a short laugh as he looked around the room, then he turned to the boy and brought his face close. "What have you done to me?" he asked softly.

“Am I a substitute?” I asked.

My collector blinked his eyes once but said nothing. He exhaled long and deep and then turned on his side to support himself on one elbow, keeping the lower half of his body on top of mine. His hand reached and laid itself on my breast.

The air around us became heavier. Inside my stomach I felt a cold rush, but my skin felt warm to the touch, and the soft material on the sofa clung to my sweat. When I spoke again it was more to myself, as though an idea had escaped my brain against my will. “Can we never surpass what we represent?”

My collector squeezed my breast and remained silent.

I kicked his legs off of mine and flexed my toes, rolling my ankles in semi-circles and trying to draw some blood to my feet and away from my quickening heart. A sheet of yellow paper, like the one in the dictionary, fell onto the floor from between the cushions, and I turned my head to see it. My collector did not let me reach for it. I knew he could feel the pounding in my chest, but he never moved; the pressure of his hand grew steadily. He didn't lift his hand or shift with my body when I tried to slip away from him, off the sofa's edge. He was in the space all around me; he knew my every twitch, the beginnings and the paths of my every thought and anything I could imagine. I couldn't fight him. My muscles went limp. I stared straight in front of me, at the ceiling. Like the flash of a photograph, I saw in my mind a reflection of myself in a hallway mirror with stubborn, finger-shaped red streaks on my shoulders and neck. My head sunk

deeper into the cushion. My hair was limp with sweat and smelled a combination of sweet and musty, and I breathed in the scent because it was mine.

My body was immobile as though it were getting x-rayed when the sofa lumbered, and I felt my collector push into me with each of his fingers, once in turn. He was gentle, or he wasn't as rough as he could be, and so I gained a little strength. "You're not answering my question," I said.

"You want to know if you're youth and beauty, and that's it?" he asked, responding this time without a pause. He stretched a leg over my hips, a dead weight across my belly. His body hair prickled my skin. "A substitute for what I've lost, you're thinking. Like you're some Platonic Ideal."

I tried to sit up. The pressure from his hand and leg kept me still. My body behaved like he had sewn everything but my arms and feet to the sofa. He smiled, but I saw his teeth more than his expression. Baring your teeth, I thought, at the trapped animal.

But his fingers inside me had been gentle. His leg was resting, and I could not sense any undue pressure. I tapped him playfully on the forehead, hoping I could dissipate the tension that had formed between us, and that he would not push down on me any more.

"You are what I might call an ideas man," I said. I let my voice trail off into a whisper.

He pressed his lips to my wrist. "Yes, you're right. Youth and beauty." He repositioned himself over me, and his whole body fell down hard on top of mine. I

inhaled my breath sharply. He stared into my face. “But that’s everything,” he said softly.

I lifted an arm over my head and touched the wall beside us, running my fingertips along its coolness to distract myself from his heat. I closed my eyes and let him move my legs further apart. He grabbed my hands and steadied them in his. I imagined the weight of his body pushing me ever downward, compressing the coiled springs in the sofa beyond their ability to expand again and sinking me in past the soft fabric, past the foam it contained. I thought of the times I’d taken baths when I was little and lay on my back in the water, falling deeper into the tub until the point just past when my ears were submerged. “You could drown,” my mother had warned with a shrill yell and began finding excuses to interrupt me, but I’d liked the feeling of the water coming together over my neck like a warm embrace. I’d wanted to stay there forever.

And now, somehow, I thought I might never leave this sofa.

I wondered what a sketch for youth and beauty would look like in my collector’s thick blue dictionary. Something stony, cold, and unchanging—ideally with a sense of a transience in life. Eternal-seeming, like a star. Such a life is appealing yet unappreciative of what it has or is. A sculpture came to my mind, even a small piece with a proud head and graceful lines and a creamy texture. But small animals were evidently easiest to draw.

I concentrated on an image over my collector’s clumsy movements and panting breaths. He’d let go of my hands. “L.” Love: sketch of a mourning dove. She’s gazing up from the ground with curiosity in her eyes. Her head is cocked slightly, her gaze

locked on something that might have hidden intentions. Her feathers lie flat; she thins out a bit in the neck when she notices a strange movement or a sense of trepidation.

The paper the boy wrote on Harris and Conrad won a prize. He presented it at a student conference and would collect a small monetary award at a departmental dinner—the English department did this kind of thing for their undergraduates. My collector was not invited to the dinner, as it was the boy's decision whether he'd want him there.

The boy brought a pen to the house that the department had presented to him as a gift. It had the university's interlocked letters in gold on the cap. The pen was heavy and scrawled thick lines. The boy set it atop the pile the lemon yellow stationery on his black leather-topped desk—the desk, in his mind, was now his because my collector continued to fail to give him a space in his library. The boy's desk was on the ground floor of my collector's home, in front of a dark corner window with a limestone sill. The view was blocked by evergreen trees where mourning doves huddled together and puffed their feathers against the emerging winter chill, but the boy still enjoyed working there. He knew there was beauty beyond the trees that he could not access, but it was enough to know it was there. He could imagine it, perhaps, even better than it was. He felt this particular corner was made for him: it sat neglected in shadows of varying shades except in the evening, when fading sunlight filtered through the tree branches, seeming to seek out the lemon yellow of his paper and the gold lettering on his certificate of achievement, which had been presented to him by the English department chair and the dean of the

College of Arts and Sciences. Both yellows gleamed in the light as entities from another world against the bleak.

My collector did not pass by there often. Both the possessions he didn't keep at university archives and his collection were a floor above. But when he did pass by, as he made it a point to from time to time, he noticed the boy's pen as a swollen shadow against the limestone. He stopped and looked but did not lift the pen from the pile of paper. As the sun lowered, its shadow stretched higher on the wall, became more distorted, and ballooned toward the ceiling. My collector sometimes watched it for long stretches of time, the play between light and shadows. But he always left the pen alone.

The ground floor had a cold gray bathroom with a full-length mirror. My collector never used the shower but tested the head one evening when he did not want to visit the upstairs. More boxes had come from his friend, and he had begun to rethink his entire system of organization. It was as though the books did not quite belong to him. Familiar copies, well worn with his thumbprints, seemed to duck away when he entered the room. They felt like the images he created—the meat of meaning preserved, but empty shells all the same. He didn't know how to reclaim ownership.

The boy, too, was avoiding his presence but taking care to leave reminders, it seemed. My collector suspected the boy had unpacked several more boxes: the paper and cardboard recycling bin outside was full, and four large stacks were pushed together in front of the sofa—something my collector would never do. Piles of paperbacks had been taken off the shelves and arranged by publisher. Penguin strewn across the floor, Broadview placed carefully on a solid chair. Dover editions set up like a house of cards on the metal table.

Still, let the boy play, he thought. He has more time than I do.

My collector aimed the neglected showerhead and turned on the water. Streams spurted wildly against the tiles with a drawn-out hiss. A short twist of the knob silenced them but did not fix the problem, he knew. Luckily, he remembered a suitable home remedy for the situation. He went upstairs, took a small plastic bowl, and filled it with vinegar. He brought it back down to the bathroom and held the bowl to the showerhead so it was immersed. He tried to distract himself with thoughts so he wouldn't feel his arm get tired.

The sour smell reached his nostrils, and he cleared his throat. He thought of salt and pepper and summer cucumbers and onions bathing in a ceramic bowl in the sunlight of his mother's kitchen. Elderly relatives from childhood in town for a barbecue, and neighbor kids and young cousins playing with a garden hose through smoke from the grill. His young feet swinging, un-callused heels hitting the legs of a tall kitchen chair.

Outside the bathroom door important-sounding words in yellow gold glowed against the desk. Upstairs, untouched books sat in their boxes; others stood misplaced (if not mishandled) on mismatched shelves. My collector dropped the bowl of vinegar.

He stood in silence. He was naked, and he was standing in front of a full-length mirror. His gaze drifted back to the shower. The vinegar bowl was upside-down over the drain; droplets slid down the tempered glass door and streaked the tiled walls. At the bottom of the shower the droplets crept together and gathered in a pool around the bowl's rim.

He didn't think to retest the showerhead. Instead he reached around his middle and held himself loosely in his right hand. He began to masturbate but gave up quickly

with a sigh. His skin looked and felt old. Blue veins stood out more than he thought they should. His eyes traced the gentle circle his fingers made. He remembered the boy's mouth on this very spot and the stray fair hairs that escaped the part on the top of his head. His slender shoulders and arms, his nervous hot breath, the clammy clutch of his twitchy fingers. The way he had to push the boy's head only slightly to communicate a desired motion. The way sweat in the boy's hair scented his fingertips.

My collector looked his reflection in the eyes. In the approaching darkness (or was it age), muted blue irises had become gray, and red and inflamed rims underneath were mere shadows (or lack of sleep). Black eyelashes looked like thick smudges on the glass. He blinked. He was still very much as he'd always been, but older. Much older now.

He knew the boy was gone—physically, he may as well be. An impression of clever worldliness and profound passions had been replaced by an impression of a desperate old man. Images, both. Facets of his identity, to be sure, but the body in the mirror had made a different kind of mistake.

“Approval given too easily,” my collector said aloud. His mouth remained open. He'd meant to assemble something like a proverb with his spoken words, but he was unable. Still, he understood without words. He had empowered the boy, and so the boy was outgrowing him. Indulgence drives them away quickly. The boy had control, and there was nothing to be done about it.

He turned the knob and stood under the showerhead. Streams of water tickled his skin—he hadn't noticed how water felt before, running over his not-scrubbing, not-rinsing, not-repeating body. Trickles dodging his body hairs and hugging his crooked

lines. The sensation wasn't entirely pleasant; there were parts of his body he was desperate to scratch, but he hardly moved. The vinegar smell permeated the water and air. Steam carried it out of the room, and it cut through the sunlight outside the door.

When the sunlight split, a thread of it caught the corner of the mirror, and a sliver of lemon yellow glowed against the wall behind it. But my collector would not see this, would never see this.

The boy was making one of his favorite walks across campus: from Ballantine Hall and past the arboretum to the main library. After a string of days that were windy and cold, he was enjoying a milder day that was a throwback to late summer. He separated himself from the crowd of students following the path past the parking lot and instead crossed the front of the building, dodged a bicyclist, and took the small wooden steps down to the right, as though he were heading toward the auditorium. He wanted to walk past the streams, by the still-green grass, and under the trees, while he still could. A row of small trees with bushy tops lined the path to the right, but he walked past them and toward the group of taller ones, where the ground sank as though enticed by the water flowing through it. Chrysanthemums and pansies had been planted in the gardens; grasses there since the late spring now had plumes on their stalks. Fattened squirrels buried everything from peanuts to donuts among them before the ground became too frozen. He watched their plump gray bodies tremble as their legs worked to dig and red tails stiffened.

“I know you,” said a girl’s voice.

The boy turned. “Really?” he asked, smiling. He hadn’t made many friends on campus and felt pleasure at her recognition. But then he stopped smiling because he didn’t want to seem overeager or desperate. “From where?” he asked, trying to sound more serious. He was vaguely aware of the need to conform to a world he was not used to. This girl was very unlike my collector—they all were.

“You know my father,” she said. One corner of her mouth twisted, and she sucked in her cheek. “I’ve seen you with him.”

The boy studied her face. He could trace a similar line of forehead, a similar roundness to the chin, a pale shade of blue that matched my collector’s eyes. He glanced at the rest of her. She must have inherited her mother’s body, he thought. It was a sturdy shape that looked as though it had been passed on through generations of farmhands.

The boy became concerned but tried to keep a casual tone. “Where have you seen me?”

“Oh, you know, I don’t know, exactly,” she said, staring him in the eyes. She stuck one of her hips out and laid a hand on it. “He works at the archives, so it must have been there.”

The boy nodded, but he knew the girl had never been there when he had. The archives office was a markedly lonely place, aside from the occasional overstressed graduate student or research assistant. “I’ve been there a few times.”

“Right.” She continued to stare at him. “I can’t imagine why else I would put you two together.”

The boy said nothing. He didn’t know what to say. He moved to go past her and continue walking down the path. He wanted to stand in the arboretum, in the shadows of

the gazebo, watching the sun soak the year's last orange and pink canna blossoms and forgetting about having met this girl.

“Wait,” she said. She grabbed his arm. “You won that prize. From the English department.”

“Yes, that was me.” The boy did not turn to face her.

“I’m an English major, too. My name’s Nancy. Are you going to the dinner for your award?”

“Maybe. I haven’t really thought about it.”

“You should.” Nancy paused. “Why wouldn’t you? This could be like a milestone. A major life event.”

“Maybe.” He tried to pull away from her, hoping to convey that he was a very busy scholar with important things to do.

“Do you have a girlfriend?” she asked abruptly.

“No, I—“ He stopped.

Nancy’s eyelids flickered. “You should take me.”

The boy stared at the ground. He wished he could collapse into it, collapse into dust and drift away in the breeze and never see this girl again. Why hadn’t my collector mentioned a daughter? “The thing is, I’m not even sure I’m going.”

“You should. You have to. You’re getting money, right?”

The boy nodded.

“Right. I’ll e-mail you details, so check it later tonight.” And then she walked past him without another word.

The boy found it impossible to avoid her after that. She sent him a series of badgering e-mail messages and waited for him outside Ballantine to walk with him to the library. He'd tried to bypass her a few days, using a different door and taking the path in front of the chemistry building, or exiting the back way facing Jordan Hall and walking along Third Street to cut through the music school. But she found him every time. Finally, he agreed to take her to the celebration dinner the following weekend and sent back the RSVP for two.

"Your roommate is hard to say 'no' to," he said when he came to the address Nancy had given him to pick her up. He was wearing a blue sweater and a jacket and was feeling self-conscious about having no shoes to match.

The girl who opened the door was pretty with light brown eyes. "I know, she's been bugging me about going to some concert all damn week. It's a friggin' month away."

Once again, the boy had a vague sense of being dropped into an unfamiliar world. "I couldn't make up my mind about the dinner thing tonight. I felt like a jackass, committing to it last-minute and making Nancy wait for an answer."

"Whatever," said the roommate. She was texting on her phone.

Nancy walked down the stairs wearing a button-down shirt and short purple skirt. She passed her roommate and the boy and pushed open the door. "You ready?" she asked with a hint of aggression.

The boy noticed she hadn't taken a coat. "Aren't you going to get cold in that?"

"You have a jacket. I can use yours."

On a hook on the backside of the door hung two coats. The boy selected one and handed it to her. “Take this.”

The dinner was at the student union, in a small dining room with plush green and plum colored carpeting and four long, wooden tables. Throughout the meal, the boy picked at his piece of baked chicken and wild rice medley and sat dumbly fingering the corner of his certificate of achievement while Nancy talked about her classes.

She mentioned her father only once. “He loves books, too. Did you know that? I bet the two of you have a lot in common.”

The boy’s silverware clanged against his plate as he sloppily cut into a piece of cake. “I don’t know him that well,” he said.

“Oh. Okay.” She let go of the subject, looking satisfied.

The department chair made a speech, and then when he felt enough time had passed the boy shook the chair’s hand and asked Nancy if she was ready to leave.

She was listening to a message on her phone and didn’t look up. “Can I just say ‘hi’ to someone first?”

The boy went outside to wait for her. He sat in the car, parked in the campus union lot under a burned-out streetlamp. The lamppost wavered over his head as the breeze picked up and rain began to fall. The boy pressed his hand to his forehead and kept the windows open so he could smell the damp sycamore trees. He heard the water rushing in Dunn’s creek and watched the lamplights in the windows of the union hotel extinguish, one by one.

Alone with his thoughts, the boy was nearly in tears. Earlier that day, he had stopped at the house to see my collector. He'd avoided the house all week because he was nervous about Nancy, but he also knew he didn't want to stay away forever. He'd let himself in a side door with the key and closed the door quietly, listening for her voice or for any conversations. He stepped lightly on the hard floor in the kitchen and listened more closely—even a hint of an echo off the limestone walls in the library upstairs. He'd heard nothing and felt relieved. He'd poured himself a glass of water.

But when the boy thought to walk through the house, through all the rooms on the ground floor and in the basement just to make sure, he realized that he'd seen nothing—no photographs or A+ papers or greeting cards or clothes or books or bathroom supplies or any evidence whatsoever of Nancy's existence.

He found my collector upstairs in the library. Before he could speak, my collector kissed him.

"You've been busy?" he asked and kissed him again. The boy didn't kiss him back, and my collector blinked. "Have a look around," he said.

The boy did look around. The chairs had been moved back onto the rug's corners; a few of the unopened boxes had been stacked. Now, all of the bookshelves were empty and stacks of books sat in rows on the couch, on the tops of the half-emptied boxes, and along the floor. The loose papers had been swept into one corner; the rusted table was still useless on a slant. All of the windows were stuck open, and the boy felt a chill over his skin. It all seemed pointless; none of it was functional. The books are here to take up this space, he thought. Merely that.

"It feels empty," he said.

“Have some patience. It’s coming along.” My collector spun the boy around and pointed opposite the couch, in front of a window. “That will be your space, right there.”

“I like my corner downstairs.”

“Oh,” said my collector. He dropped the boy’s hand.

The boy felt a pang of guilt but pressed on. “When will we get to Chicago?” he asked.

“What? Why?”

“I want to go to the Art Institute. To see the rooms.” He wanted my collector to see them too—to witness the potential of collections.

“Next weekend, perhaps? And there’s a tiny bookstore we can go to that is kind of on the way, if there’s time.”

The boy sighed at the idea of spending another afternoon and evening sipping brandy on an old lady’s porch. My collector looked hurt, but the boy didn’t care: nothing had changed. Nothing was going to change.

“Will you stay tonight?” asked my collector.

“No.” And then he’d left as abruptly as he came.

A hand fumbled with the car door. “Sorry that took so long,” said Nancy. She slid into her seat and played with the radio station. The boy drove her home, to her apartment complex across from the football stadium.

Nancy opened the front door. “Come in for a while,” she called to the boy before he could drive away.

The boy stopped and responded, “Okay.” He’d remembered a plastic bag in the backseat he’d forgotten to give to her. He parked the car and got out.

The apartment looked completely dark behind her. “Looks like it’s just you and me,” said Nancy, tipping her head. “We can hang out for a while. Right?” She still stood in the doorway, one hand on either side of the frame. “Did you get enough to eat? I can cook us something.”

The boy believed her to be sincere. “No, it’s all right.” He twisted the handles on the plastic bag he was holding. He’d been nervous about what to bring her because he supposed he ought to bring her something, and so he stopped at Kroger on his way and bought a tiny basket of flowers. It took him some time to select the least wilted blossoms and find leaf tips that were only a little brown. The cashier had offered him a piece of tissue paper for inside the bag, which he then crumpled and put next to the plant to support it.

“What is that?” Nancy took the bag from him and looked in it.

“I thought I should get you something, but I never got a chance to give it to you.”

“That’s very sweet.” She closed the bag and swung it in front of her as she walked into the apartment. She left the door open.

The boy was nervous, but he stepped through the doorway. The apartment was dark except for a light on over the kitchen table. Nancy closed the door and tossed the shopping bag onto one of the chairs around the table. The boy heard the rustle of the dried leaf tips against the plastic, the clunk as the bag slid off the chair and hit the floor. “I can pick that up,” he said and took a step toward it.

“Wait,” said Nancy. She tugged on the belt loops of his pants and pulled him forward. Then she dropped one hand and slid open his zipper. “Don’t worry about it,” she said.

Surprised, the boy stepped away from her and tripped over his feet. He fell into a beanbag chair, and his foot caught a lamp cord. Nancy laughed, and he saw the muscles in her neck tighten, her shoulders shake, and her stomach ripple.

“I’m kind of expected to do this,” she said. “You don’t know me, but I put out for everyone.” She lowered herself in front of him. “Not that I mind.” The boy saw that her shirt was open; she wasn’t wearing a bra. She crawled forward and lifted her skirt, and he caught a glimpse of some lace. She slipped her hand inside his waistband. He tried to sit up but sunk deeper into the chair. Nancy’s hand slid in further, and she grasped him eagerly.

It all felt too familiar. The grip was the same, exactly.

The boy panicked. He scurried to find a surface to hold onto, and his hand brushed a book that clattered to the floor. The noise made Nancy stop a moment. He pulled her hand out of his pants. He gripped the side of the table more steadily and lifted himself up from the chair. He apologized. “I have to go.”

Nancy’s eyelids flashed open and closed. “What for?”

“I have to go, I’m sorry.”

“I want you to tell me what the fuck for.”

“I just have to go.” The boy tripped over his feet again as he hurried, and his body slammed into the front door.

Half naked, she followed him and gripped his elbow. “Does my father do it better for you?” she asked in a hissed whisper. “You can tell me.”

The boy didn’t say anything. He pulled his arm away, twisted the doorknob and threw the door open, not bothering to close it before running to his car.

He drove past the road leading to his mother’s house, past the road to my collector’s. He took Walnut all the way down to State Road 37. He was heading to I-65; he was heading to Chicago.

He drove, and wind rattled the car. Aside from the occasional semi, the highway seemed deserted. Nighttime wrapped around him like a soft blanket, and he saw the moving shadows of deer and possums. He saw trees shiver their branches and the rush of clouds across the moonlight. He saw fan blades spin high on the sides of long barns; he thought of the chickens trapped inside and had to look away.

My collector sat in one of his high-backed chairs and slid a knife blade through the packaging tape, exposing the narrow gap between box flaps. He smoothly glided its length; his hand did not waver and cause the blade to screech against the side of the cardboard. He angled it sharply to avoid scratching the objects inside. Another batch to sort out what might belong here and what might be snatched up by the hands of other collectors. It was another delivery from the yard sale junkie, left balanced on the sill of an open window. We were upstairs when he’d stopped.

He lifted the box flaps, and the edges squeaked against the sides of the box and each other. A deep red color spread across his face, and his eyes moved back and forth rapidly, as though he were dreaming. My eyes moved to the box.

On top was a German catechism, tiny and blue, with a tarnished zipper running along its edge. He pushed this to the side carefully with the backs of his fingers.

Underneath was a yellow and frayed illustrated book of birds from South America. Appeal of the exotic. Satisfaction in thinking them not so far out of reach. I could feel him adding layers to his sense of self, or at least trying to recover them.

I selected Plato's *Apologia* from the pile on the metal table. "Have you ever considered writing an explanation of your methods?" I asked my collector. "An excuse for your behavior?"

He said nothing in response. I heard him try the zipper on the catechism, and I opened to the first page of the *Apologia*.

A piece of lemon yellow stationery fell into my lap.